

Die Before You Die
Mark 8:31-38
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In the spring of 1945 a 30-something Lutheran pastor awaited execution in a Nazi concentration camp, but he kept writing and speaking about God's love and the call of Christ. He was hanged for his involvement in the resistance movement against Hitler's regime. This courageous man's name was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In his famous book "The Cost of Discipleship" he writes, "The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every [one] must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old [self] which is the result of his [or her] encounter with Christ."

We all want to be disciples. The question is how much cost are we willing to bear following Christ? There are students and parents from Parkland, who could be at home crying for those whom they have lost, but instead are traveling to Tallahassee and to Washington, DC to speak up, hoping to effect change, and prevent the next mass murder in a school. I get emails regularly from Sandy Hook parents reminding me of the work they have now down for five years, sacrificing nearly everything else in life to try to see that other parents do not share their experience. So these parents come and sit with the other parents, because they understand that pain from the inside out.

Every time someone dies a physical death, we struggle with the loss. It is like a deep wound in the pit of the stomach. A part of you dies with the one who have gone, because you gave yourself to them in love. And as painful as it is, to lose yourself in that death, you would give yourself away again, in any mutual relationship of love, as the Rineer and Romito family will testify. Because we know that this kind of loving is what life is all about. God is love, and God on earth as Jesus poured out his life in love for us. Then he challenged those around him to do the same. Give of yourself in love of God and of others. And so we do. It is how we are made – to love. And it hurts, especially when you love well, but it is also the very best thing we ever do.

Mark 8:31-38

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Humanity must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." ³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Humanity will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." (NRS, adapted)

Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor and author of *New York Times* bestseller, ***Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*** reminds us: *This saying of Jesus that we are to deny the self and lose our life to gain it has been abused and perverted. Perverted into messages like "If you want to be a follower of Jesus you must deny your Queerness, pick up your cross of heterosexuality and follow him." Or "deny your dignity and pick up your cross of continued domestic abuse and follow him."....I want to convince you that when Jesus says deny yourself, that maybe it's really denying the self that wants to see itself as separate from God and others. Deny the self that believes that spirituality is a suffering avoidance program. Deny the self that does not feel worthy of God's love. Deny the self that thinks it is more worthy of God's love than its enemy is. Deny the self that thinks it can do it self. Deny the self that is turned in on the self.*

Every time we choose to love, we are choosing to die before we die. Every time you let a piece of your heart go to someone else, you are letting go of your autonomy. And when you give yourself away, you cannot just retrieve that part of yourself. You cannot just get it back.

Because when you give yourself away in love, it is not *just* that you gave part of yourself away, it is that when you love you become a larger self, a more expanded self, because have you let others into your life. So if you then change your mind and take yourself back, you will, if you allow yourself to feel it, experience a gaping hole. You will feel the space you made for that other person or persons. And the more you loved, the larger the hole. Our true self has an enormous capacity to love others, but our false self is always protective, guarded, hoping to avoid being hurt. There is not enough time to talk more about our true and false self, but I invite you to read Richard Rohr's books, *Falling Upward & Immortal Diamond* to understand more deeply about giving yourself away. Rohr says, *And in the case of surrendering God, you will find that you are not actually losing yourself in the other, but gaining who you really are.* In that you are finding yourself.

In the life of this congregation, we've had two losses in the last week – a painful death and a shocking resignation. Sometimes when we hear of something coming that is not what we want, we enter into a period of denial because we don't want to let go. Peter cannot handle any change in his relationship with Jesus – no way, he says. He denies it. You are not suffering and dying. You are staying right here with us. And Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan. Let's get our spirits attuned to God's Spirit." There is risk involved in loving people. Jesus himself struggled later in the garden of Gethsamane, but he ultimately coached himself, "No my will, but Thine." Our temptation when we face loss or fear of loss is to turn inward with our pain and outward with our aggression, trying to avoid being hurt. But loving hurts. That's why the grief of a parent in Parkland or any parent is so deep, because of the sacrifices of love that have been made. But Who better than God understands inexplicable violence being heaped upon an undeserving son or daughter. Christ came to earth to love, and to love all the way to the cross and beyond it.

Jesus did not come to earth to change God's mind about us, by taking our punishment. No Jesus came to earth to change our mind about God. So we would stop fearing death and loss, and start dying with him now. Die to the self that fears dying. Die to the self that fears loving. Die to the self that is turned in on itself because of fear. Die to the self that cannot trust any more.

Abandon the illusion you're a self-contained individual.

Be a part of this wounded world,
and find yourself with Christ.

Set aside your own desires,

give yourself fully for others;
be the hands and heart of Jesus.

Renounce self-protection,

accept your brokenness,
and reach out for love.

Let go of your own plans.

Join in the healing of the world.
You will not be alone.

Follow your soul, not your ego.

Follow it right into people's suffering.
Follow it right into the heart of God.

Pour yourself out;

let the world pour in;
then you are one with the Beloved.

Steve Garnaas-Holmes, Methodist minister

The world says, suit yourself, grab all you can, and follow your own passions.

Jesus says deny yourself, grab your cross, and follow me.

And it feels like you are going to get lost when you follow this guy, or you're going to get hurt, or you're at least not going to be in control. So that's why it is so much easier (though terribly unfulfilling) to play it safe following the values of the world. But aren't you ready to break free of fear and live?

Only those willing to die for love will ever really live. When you surrender to God, you lose nothing, and gain everything. Surrendering to God means dying now, as well as later. But the sooner we die to our old self, the more readily our new expansive self in Christ can emerge, casting off our fear. There is no fear in love, and God IS love.

On Thursday at Presbytery, we heard a guest speaker/teacher Debbie Rundlett at presbytery quoting, “Socrates who said, “Know yourself. And Cicero who said, “Control yourself.” And Jesus who said, “Give yourself.” And in order to give yourself, you must control yourself, and in order to control yourself, you must know yourself. I want to add this: In order to truly know yourself, look into the eyes of Christ and see more deeply that YOU are the beloved, and there is absolutely nothing to fear.