

February 25, 2024
“Taking (Dis)Ownership”
Psalm 22:23-31 / Mark 8:31-37
Pastor Tim

Mary Oliver concludes her famous poem, *The Summer Day*, with a question:

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?*

I think it's more or less the same question Jesus puts to his disciples, and to the crowd gathered around them, Do you want to save your life, and so lose it, OR lose your life, and so save it?

That's a paraphrase, of course. This is what Jesus actually says: “If any wish to come after me, let them DENY themselves and TAKE up their cross and follow me. 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”

If you were with us a couple of Sundays ago, you'll recognize that this teaching, and this morning's reading from Mark, occurs right before Jesus' mystical Transfiguration on the mountain top.

Jesus for the first time foretells his suffering and death, and resurrection, but Peter doesn't get it. He doesn't want to hear it. Just before this account, Peter has declared that for him, Jesus is the Messiah, and so he's not ready to hear that his Messiah is gonna die.

So he confronts Jesus, rebukes him. And as we acknowledged two weeks ago, Jesus rebukes him right back. “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” And then this teaching about what it means to follow him. The cost of discipleship.

For our purposes today, I want to focus our attention on the first part of Jesus' teaching: “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves ...” DENY themselves.

For a long time, too long, I understood that to mean what the big-C Church has long taught.

Based on the misguided and devastating doctrine of “original sin,” I understood, like so many, that we have to deny ourselves because we are fundamentally and primarily sinful, unworthy of God’s love. We are the problem, and so we have to continually work against our own human nature, our own selves, if we have any hope of following Jesus. We have to lose our lives in this way in order to save them.

But that tired and traumatic theological premise, as we have asserted many times before at Calvary, simply doesn’t square with either the unconditional nature of God’s love, or with Jesus’s own assertion that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbors AS OURSELVES.

I think a more fitting translation of the Greek word, *aparneomai*, is to disown.

To DISOWN ourselves is to acknowledge that our lives are not our own – or at least not ours alone. Our lives don’t belong to us – at least not only to us. They belong to God, the One who breathed and continues to breathe life into us, and so they belong to each other. We belong to each other.

And so to disown ourselves is to give up “ownership” of our lives to that broader sense of belonging, to a broader – the broadest – sense of cooperative ownership.

In variations of this teaching found in both Matthew and Luke, Jesus asserts that to follow him, to be his disciple, requires rejection of your own family.

From Matthew: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me I not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”

Luke puts it even more bluntly: “Whoever comes to me and does not HATE father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

But again, we have to recognize the hyperbole, the exaggeration, to hear what Jesus is saying. The invitation to be a disciple is an invitation to a broader – the broadest – understanding of family.

Elsewhere Jesus throws out another provocative question, when someone points out his own mother and brothers waiting to speak with him: “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?”

And he points not to his biological family, but to his disciples: “Here are my mother and my brothers!”

Family is reimagined. Community is reimagined. Life itself is reimagined beyond narrow provincialism and self-serving, self-protective instincts for worldly, personal benefit.

“For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” asks Jesus.

“Don’t gain the world and lose your soul;” sings Bob Marley. “wisdom is better than silver and gold.”

The wisdom, Jesus insists, is that our lives are not our own. They don’t belong to us because we belong to God and to each other. To follow him is to live into that inclusive, expansive understanding, to live into a more inclusive and expansive understanding and practice of love.

So denying ourselves, disowning ourselves, is not about wholesale self-judgment and self-sabotage. It’s about identifying, naming, confronting and ultimately letting go of whatever in and of ourselves, in and of our lives, gets in the way of a more inclusive, expansive understanding and practice of love. Including, as in Peter’s case in rebuking Jesus, our fear of suffering and death.

And so making room in ourselves, in our lives, for such love, divine love, to do what it does.

This is not unlike the Buddhist notion of non-attachment. Freedom from attachment, even and perhaps especially to our own selves, opens us up to lives of greater love and compassion.

This is losing your self, your life, in order to find it. Disowning your self, your life – your one wild and precious life – in order to save it.

In that spirit, I want to close this sermon a little differently. With a song, before we sing together.

Go to audio recording for song – a rework of *Ho Hey*, by The Lumineers. Here are the lyrics:

*Jesus said, Come follow me
Though blind you'll surely see
Leave worldly gain behind
Turns out your life you'll find
In love, heart, soul and mind*

*It's your self you gotta lose
If you wanna find your muse
Make room for love to reign
Your life be God's domain
Hold each other's joy and pain*

***I belong to you, you belong to me, we are God's heart
I belong to you, you belong to me, we are God's***

And love we need it now (4x)

*God has set the covenant
Through our lives we pay the rent
To each other we belong
Love shared, we join the song
New life, it won't be long*

*Journey on, we take this road
With Jesus where he goes
Opening to love, our guide
Peace and justice will abide
So let's enjoy the ride*

***I belong to you, you belong to me, we are God's heart
I belong to you, you belong to me, we are God's***

May it be so.