
DENIAL THAT LEADS TO CHRIST

Sometimes we just get it wrong—really wrong.

- Sometimes when we think we've got things figured out, particularly about GOD's plan for the world, we just end up in the wrong place or getting in the way.

JESUS said, "*The SON OF MAN must suffer many things and be rejected, and killed, and after three days rise again.*"

- Peter then took JESUS aside, but Mark doesn't tell us what was said other than that Peter rebuked HIM.
- Matthew tells us that Peter said, "Never, LORD; this shall never happen to YOU."
 - Peter may have been saying, "I can't believe this would happen."
 - More likely he meant, "I'm not going to let this happen. I won't let YOU go to Jerusalem."

In any case, JESUS in turn rebukes Peter with that familiar saying, "Get behind me, Satan," which literally means, "Satan, be gone."

- And then to help Peter and all the others understand, JESUS does some teaching about personal agendas and the will of GOD.

"Whoever wants to be MY disciples must deny themselves and take up the cross and follow ME."

- We talk a lot about taking up the cross, but what does it mean to deny oneself?
 - We probably have some ideas of what that means, but I suspect that whatever we may think, JESUS is talking about a different kind of denial.

First, let's consider what it is not: a sort of false denial.

- Frankly, "denying oneself" used to bother me.
- I used to think of it as having to become something I am not,
 - which, in a sense, is denying who GOD made me.
 - That's certainly not what GOD wants, and is false denial.

This is the season of Lent.

- How many of you are giving something up for Lent?
 - Denying ourselves certain pleasures can be a good thing to help us focus on our need for GOD and make changes in our lives.
 - But giving up something that brings you joy just because you're supposed to is not what GOD wants.

Giving something up for Lent originally was a discipline in preparation for baptism: forty days without eating.

- But not on Sundays, though, because Sundays are in/of Lent.
 - The goal of fasting was to better understand the need for CHRIST and the cross.
 - Just as we can't live without food, we can't live without JESUS.

I'm more in favor of taking something extra on for Lent because CHRIST took on our sins and carried them to the cross for us.

- We can consider taking on something extra during Lent:
 - prayer for people you know who do not know CHRIST;
 - extra volunteer service to help others in JESUS' name;
 - some kind of sacrificial giving that blesses others.
- But denying yourself something in Lent just because that's what you're supposed to do in Lent is a false denial.

So, what, then, is true denial of self?

- True denial begins with trust in GOD,
 - trust that GOD's way is the best way.
- The other readings today speak of the faith of Abraham and Sarah.
 - The decisions they made were very much the kind of denial of self for which JESUS asks in the Gospel.
 - But it was not a denial of who they were, even though their names were changed: Abram to Abraham; and Sarai to Sarah.
- Yet, these name changes reflected their true denial.
 - They chose to deny the life in their homeland that would keep them safe and secure, just the two of them, independent and perhaps even apart from GOD.
 - Instead, they chose a life that would propel them into a relationship with GOD,
 - and a future realized only in the context of that relationship.
 - Though it meant leaving their home and familiar way of life, they chose a future in relationship with the ONE who made the ridiculous promise of descendants to a couple past childbearing.

On the other hand, Peter in today's Gospel was choosing the safe life of his own agenda: more of JESUS' teachings and crowds and miracles.

- When JESUS told the disciples of the journey HE would take, thereby inviting them to follow HIM, Peter said, "Ah, no, I don't think so."
- JESUS's rebuke of Peter was to say, "Peter, don't let the devil convince you that isolation and safety is the way we should go. Choose the life that launches us into the relationship of the cross."

JESUS places true denial in connection with the cross.

- To deny oneself moves one into what the cross really means:
 - not just death and suffering, but hope and resurrection;
 - not just individual sacrifice, but a relationship with the GOD who sacrificed by choosing a human relationship with us.
 - The cross represents GOD's commitment to humankind.
 - The cross represents what happens when we deny self and enter into meaningful associations with others.
 - We receive from GOD ⇕ and we share what we have received with others ⇔. ✕
 - GOD does not bless us just for our well-being;
 - GOD blesses us to be a blessing to others.

In 2016, Madeline Adams of Boston College woke up the morning of the Atlantic Coast Conference Women's Cross-Country Championship ready to compete.

- She knew what it would take and she would stop at nothing to achieve her goals.
- Unfortunately, her body didn't agree with her.
 - Two hundred yards from the finish line she collapsed from exhaustion.
 - Spectators and competitors watched as she fell to the ground, and struggling as she might, she could not get back up.

Clemson senior Evie Tate knew how much finishing the race would mean.

- So, despite teammates and competitors racing past her, she ran over to her rival, picked her up off the ground, and attempted to help her reach the finish line.
 - But Madeline Adams' collapse was more than Evie Tate could handle.
 - Now it looked like neither would make it to the finish.

That's when Rachel Pease of Louisville reached them.

- Though racers continued to zoom by, Rachel Pease grabbed on Madeline Adams' other shoulder, and working together with Evie Tate, the three of them inched to the finish line.

Though the world might tell us otherwise, it's not always about winning.

- Self-denial is willing to give up comfort and acclaim so that everyone makes it to the finish line,
 - especially when it is done in JESUS' name.

Lent, and life for that matter, is not just about yourself and what you are doing or not doing.

- Lent connects us to CHRIST and a community of believers.
- Lent is willing to wear a cross on our forehead in the grocery store or restaurant or workplace so that others can see our witness.
- Lent is talking about your Lenten disciplines with others so that they might better understand the sacrifice of CHRIST.
- Lent is setting aside your personal goals to help others, even strangers.
- Lent is a denial of self in the best way:
 - that self that refuses community;
 - that self that keeps for itself;
 - that self that chooses safety;
 - that self that thinks it can do it all on its own;
 - that self that regularly rejects the deep need for belonging and purpose.

JESUS' cross is an invitation to imagine that you need others desperately, frequently, and intimately.

JESUS' cross is an invitation to imagine that you need GOD desperately, frequently, and intimately.

JESUS' cross is an invitation to recognize that others need you desperately, frequently, and intimately.

JESUS' cross is an invitation to deny the impulse to rely on yourself alone and instead seek the help of GOD and others.

The denial of self is embracing the truth that you can't live in this world—that you can't live your life—without being connected to GOD ⇕ and to others ⇔.

- The cross of JESUS is an invitation to something different, something bigger, something more powerful, something life-changing.
 - It is a denial of self that leads to others,
 - and it is a denial of self that leads us to CHRIST.
 - That is the self-denial of the cross.