

Here's an ironic truth about life: If you want to truly become yourself, give yourself away. There's no way to teach that by words. It is something that must be experienced. When you give of yourself in love you find yourself more complete than you were before. It is when people selfishly hoard and keep that they become more and more dead every day. Perhaps the easiest example of the healthy selflessness of love is being a parent. Parents are not diminished by giving of themselves for their children. They are somehow made more complete.

Jesus is speaking to this truth in our gospel reading, although his language may deeply challenge us. Before we get to his words today, however, we should remind ourselves of what we read in last Sunday's gospel. Last Sunday we read about Jesus being baptized by John and then going into the wilderness for 40 days. There he was with the wild beasts and was tested (or tempted) by Satan. He comes through it triumphantly and then goes on to begin his public ministry.

In today's gospel reading we are deep into Jesus public ministry but the circumstances haven't changed much. This is

the first time that predicts the upcoming crucifixion and resurrection to his disciples. He starts off by saying, "...the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes..." Our translations do us a slight disservice here. In an effort to make smooth grammar they miss the full effect of the Greek word we translate as "rejected". It would be more complete to say, "[He would' be *rejected after testing* by the elders..." and so on. That might help us to hear echoes of last week's gospel where Jesus is tested by Satan.

And sure enough, Satan is on the scene again here. When Peter rebukes Jesus for these statements, - and really, Peter has a valid point of view: why would Jesus be tested by the religious leaders and then rejected and killed. Shouldn't these be the people who will embrace him? Shouldn't they know him? - but Jesus rebukes Peter in return. He says, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." And so again this week we have Jesus being tested and Satan on the scene.

This dramatic text is really a battle scene. It is like two exorcists going at each other. Peter is convinced that Jesus is demon possessed, and so he decides that the demon must

be driven out. Jesus in turn tells Peter to get behind him - thus putting himself in front of Satan. This battle scene reveals some very disturbing things about the nature of Satan and evil.

It would be nice if we could consider all of Jesus' followers to be great guys who were sin free. They weren't. We know that evil lurked and dwelt in them, just like it so easily does in us.

And then there is the even more troubling bit. After calling Peter "Satan" Jesus says, "For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." If that doesn't hurt deeply, then you haven't understood it. Jesus has not made a three-fold order of things. He did not say that there are divine things, human things, and Satanic things. He has only made a two-fold order - divine things and evil things. And where does the human point of view fit? Well, let's just say it doesn't make it into the divine things.

How can this be? Why would Jesus put human things in the realm of Satan? Are we really that bad? Are our thoughts that hopelessly corrupt?

Consider it from this point of view: The human way of doing things looks to the world for trust instead of God. When you're looking to the world for trust you're basing your faith on unstable territory. Where did we begin this sermon? With the ironic truth that if you want to truly become yourself you have to give yourself away. The earthly point of view can't grasp that. It can't grasp as we had in the children's sermon that only when the chocolate powder gives up its granulated existence in the milk can it truly become a delicious drink.

Jesus puts the thoughts of the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes in the realm of the human point of view; and thus the evil point of view. Why? Because they will test him. They will discover that he is not going to improve their political clout. He is not going to help them overcome their identified oppressor - the Romans. He is not going to lead them in any way that looks successful to them. From their perspective he's a threat to all they've worked so hard to achieve. They've tested him and then rejected him.

Before we think we can learn from their mistakes and be better ourselves though, we need to remember just how deeply the

human point of view is embedded into our lives. We live in a consumer driven culture. Perhaps we aren't selfish, but we know that money can buy an honorable lifestyle in a place that is safe, has good schools, and has good services. We want homes that are comfortable and pleasant. We like to be entertained - and with good quality entertainment.

Does Jesus say we have to reject all this stuff?

Well, let's not sugarcoat the situation. All of these things have the very real possibility of leading us down life denying paths. Marilyn Salmon professor of New Testament at United Theological Seminary in St. Paul Minnesota notes this: **According to human values, one's own life comes first. We might be kind and generous and thoughtful toward others, yet cultural norms dictate the priority of our own safety or privilege or physical comfort. Jesus advocates risking your life for the sake of another. In other words be willing to lose your life for the sake of the gospel in order to save it.**

It is very easy to define your life by what you can do. You can see your life as what you by your own gifts and abilities can create for yourself. It is your life that you earn by using money, honor, status and friends. You own it. And if you created it, it can be taken away. Sooner or later

you'll fail. Or sooner or later preserving those things will become more life denying than life affirming. God didn't make you to be a slave to other people's opinions, or a slave to honor, or a slave to your stuff. God made you for life.

Jesus isn't being mean when he says take up your cross and follow him. He's being honest. He's simply stating that what you think you want isn't often what you really need.

What you need is to be dependent upon God's grace and goodness, not the world's. Seeing that and recognizing that can be really hard. The cross was pain, shame and death. It is hard to see anything good in that. And yet that selflessness on Jesus' part opened the way to God's abundant grace.

Dare to let go of the human point of view that binds you. Dare to see things from God's perspective, and even if it looks as foolish as a cross, dare to embrace it so that God may work in you fullness of life. Amen