

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday in Lent
Sunday, February 25, 2024**

**“Deny Themselves”
Mark 8:31-38**

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Jesus “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’” (v. 34). This morning, I could preach a harsh and judgy sermon on self-denial; it would finally give me a chance to hammer on this pulpit as I chastise you, what with your leisure activities—and your dancing. And I suppose it would be quite on-brand as a Presbyterian minister.

However, as much as we might all enjoy that, I don’t think it would address our fundamental confusion about what self-denial really means. When we hear Christ’s call to deny ourselves, I’m not sure we really know what to make of it: I think we’re uncertain what self-denial is supposed to involve—and indeed, why self-denial is demanded of Christians in the first place.

I think the most common understanding of self-denial—and one that gives rise to much confusion—is that self-denial means renouncing the pleasures of life; that it means proving our faith by denying ourselves what we would otherwise enjoy. That’s certainly difficult; that’s a difficult path to pursue... But it’s not just that this kind of self-denial is difficult; it’s also that it introduces a real theological tension.

How are we to reconcile this denial of joy with our faith in God as the Author and Creator of joy? The Shorter Catechism of 1648 asked “What is the chief end of [humankind]?” And the answer? “[T]o glorify God, and to *enjoy* him forever.” Or think of St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians, often heard on the Sunday of Joy in Advent, where Paul writes: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (4:4). How then can we understand self-denial as renouncing joy? I think—whether or not Christians can articulate this theological tension—I think there’s a feeling of confusion around this understanding of self-denial. Should we be joyless in obedience to the God of joy? And I think that confusion leads to one of two responses.

One option is to ignore Christ’s call to deny ourselves—or at least, to trivialize it, to dilute self-denial until it’s really just meaningless. I’m reminded of the story of an older gentleman, new to town, who walked into the local Tim Horton’s and ordered three extra large coffees; he proceeded to take a sip of one, a sip of the next, a sip of the third, then finished them up and ordered three more. The staff member suggested, “How about I pour these for you one at a time, when they’re good and hot,” but the man explained, “Oh no, many years ago, my one brother away to England, and my other brother moved away moved to Australia, and this is how we promised always to remember each other.”

All the regulars became accustomed to this little tradition, until one fateful morning, the man walked in—and ordered only *two* extra large coffees. There was a hush, as everyone wondered which of his brothers had died. He sat down and quickly finished his two extra large coffees,

then returned to the counter and ordered two more. The staff member said: “Two extra large coffees, on the house—with our sincerest condolences on the death of your brother.” But the man looked up, confused—and said, “Oh no, no! My brothers are fine! I’ve given up coffee for Lent!”

And really, even if we don’t ignore it entirely, we can always find ways to maneuver around self-denial, and to make Christ’s call seem so trivial that it loses any meaning. This approach may help us preserve our conviction that God is the God of joy—but it makes Christ’s call to self-denial appear almost meaningless.

The second response is to go all-in and to renounce the wholesome pleasures of life in obedience to Christ’s call to deny ourselves. I once met someone, years ago, who was very unhappy—partly because he had given up his love of *reading* for Lent; he’d given up reading literature, and he’d given up reading the Bible, as part of some misguided Lenten discipline. And it struck me as very, very sad. I suppose that approach at least takes seriously Christ’s call to self-denial, but—in doing so—I think it completely loses sight of the God who created us for joy.

And what’s worse, that sort of self-denial can far too easily get mixed up with harmful feelings of self-loathing. You might remember the old lyrics of the hymn “Come down, O Love divine” from the previous edition of the *Book of Praise*; it was revised in the newer hymnbook, but we used to sing about “true lowliness of heart, which takes the humbler part, and o’er its own shortcomings weeps *with loathing*” (Siena). In the church, historically, there’s been too much of self-loathing—which is not faithful, which ignores the reality that God lovingly made us in God’s image... So again, how could we ever reconcile this type of joyless self-denial with the God of the Gospel, the God who invites us into joy?

But what’s the alternative? How can we understand self-denial in a way that fits with the God of joy—the God who loves us and who, in Christ, gave his life for us (Ephesians 5:2)? I think one place to start is in the immediate context of Christ’s call to self-denial in our Gospel Lesson: here Jesus is speaking not only to his disciples (that is, those who were already following him), but also to a crowd of those who were not yet following him—those who were maybe considering following him, and who were wondering what they must do to follow Jesus. In our Gospel Lesson, we heard this: “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’” (v. 34).

In this way, Jesus offers this call to self-denial as part of his invitation to follow him. That is, Jesus doesn’t just tell us to deny ourselves, but invites us to self-denial as an opening for discipleship. This kind of self-denial is meant to make it possible to follow Christ. This isn’t about renouncing joys or spurning the wholesome pleasures of life. (So much of what we assume about self-denial is really what we’ve projected onto this text.) There’s no talk here of turning away from the joys of life. Rather, what Christ makes clear is that self-denial is for the sake of discipleship; self-denial is a prerequisite for following Christ.

This kind of self-denial is therefore really *not about us*; it’s not about what we like or dislike or what we figure we could give up for a few weeks. I think we get it all backwards when we think

about self-denial as rejecting the things in life that we enjoy; the irony is that's a self-centred understanding of self-denial! This really isn't about us; this call to self-denial *is about Christ*, and Christ's invitation for us *to follow him*.

When Christ calls us to deny ourselves so that we can follow him, this is really about letting go of those parts of ourselves that would prevent us from following Christ. Self-denial isn't about renouncing joy; it's about renouncing that which keeps us from delighting in the joy of God! Self-denial is about renouncing those parts of us—those broken habits, those stubborn doubts—that would hinder us from loving God and our neighbour! Self-denial isn't about turning away from joy; it's about embracing the deeper joy of the presence of Christ! And this kind of self-denial is definitely not about self-loathing; to the contrary, self-denial can mean leaving self-loathing behind so that we can recognize at last Christ's love for us!

In the original language of our Gospel Lesson, in Greek, the verb for “deny themselves” (ἀπαρνέομαι) can also mean to “lose sight of one's self and one's own interests,” “to forget one's self” (Thayer). In a sense, self-denial is about a *decentring of self*. And there's something very freeing about no longer thinking of ourselves as the centre of our own stories; there's something very liberating about decentring ourselves, so that Christ may become the centre of our lives.

In our next hymn, instead of singing about how “o'er [our] own shortcomings” we “weep with loathing” (Siena), we will instead sing about a healing, redeeming vision of self-denial: self-denial that makes space for God's good purposes for us, self-denial that allows for the life-giving centring of Christ in our lives: “May the love of Jesus *fill me*, as the waters fill the sea; Christ exalting, self-denying, this is victory” (Wilkinson). Amen.