

Lent2_YrB_030115_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

Does it confuse you, like it does me, to come in on a story in the middle of it's telling? We just started today's Gospel lesson with "*Then Jesus began to...*" But what happened before '*then*'? Starting this lesson in the middle of the 8th chapter, when last week's Gospel was from the first chapter of Mark, does not give us the context we need. We are starting in the middle of the story and we don't know what came before and in order to understand today's text, we definitely need some help.

Jesus had asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered, "Some say John the Baptist. Some say Elijah, and others say one of the prophets."

Then he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?"

Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

And this is where we come in today: THEN Jesus began to teach his disciples what it means to be the Messiah: "That the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes and be killed..." And he goes on to talk about being raised after three days.

Peter interrupts Jesus then to rebuke him. But Jesus rebukes Peter right back. Then he calls the crowd that has been following him together with the disciples and starts to talk to all of them: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me..."

Now I don't know about you, but this is always the part in Lent when I begin to feel a little squirmy and uncomfortable. I know the Gospels were written after Jesus death, not by reporters on the scene, so what is recorded as having been said by Jesus may or may not be word-for-word. So, if Jesus did say we have to deny ourselves, does that mean we have to give up who we are? If he said we have to take up our crosses, what did he mean by that? Does it mean we literally have to die?

In the earliest Church, this was not what was emphasized; although people observed periods of fasting, there was no season of Lent until the 4th Century or so. The joy of the resurrection was the most prominent feature driving the Church's theology. But, as the so-called 'theology of glory' became the rule in the personal, social and political lives of Europeans, excess, power struggles and corruption followed.

When the Reformation came along, those opposed to the abuses of the earlier age went 180 degrees in the opposite direction, which became the 'theology of the cross' instead. Calvinism in particular espoused such ideas as 'total depravity' (we are unable to choose to follow God because we are inherently sinful) and 'limited atonement' (only the elect whom God has chosen will be saved).

Those and a few other not very helpful or hopeful points sailed across the Atlantic in the Mayflower and have followed us to the 21st Century, and we have to work hard to overcome them!

Some of us are told that the way we live our lives is sinful, that we are not 'good' people if we do such-and-such a thing, or if we believe such-and-such a thing. Some of us are told that we are not 'good' people if we need help to feed our children, or need help to live on an unjust wage, or need help to put clothes on our backs. We are expected to do everything, and do it well, on our own.

We talk a lot here about how we matter to God. That God creates all of us 'good' and loves all of us. That God wants all of us to be who we are created to be. Should we, therefore, deny who we are? I hope not. So it made me happy to read a current theologian's take on this passage that was totally different from the prevailing "I-am-unworthy" mindset.

This person suggested that the cross might not mean only humiliation and death. What if we consider that the cross can also mean that God, by choosing to send God's Son to be human, chooses human relationships? That God is committed to humanity?

We define our identities through the groups we belong to. To a family. To a team. To a sorority or fraternity. To a company. To a political party. To a church. Here, we define ourselves as a community of believers connected to Christ.

In this community, we don't do Lent alone. Lent is really a strange sort of communal experience: we are people who wear crosses on our foreheads as we go buy groceries after church on Ash Wednesday. We are people who talk about what we have given up for Lent, or what we have taken on, to people we don't really even know. And we do that because we realize it's not just about us as individuals.

Lent is a denial of the self that refuses community, a denial of the self that thinks it can survive on its own, a denial of the self that rejects the deep need of belonging. (Karoline Lewis)

Jesus' words are not demanding us to deny our true selves. They invite us, instead, to realize that our selves need other selves... desperately... personally... because relationship is what to be human is all about. Belonging. Relationship. Without those things in our lives, we can barely know who we are.

We can't be ourselves on our own. That is being egotistical and self-absorbed. Doing that breaks community.

How do we carry out needing others? We know how to need each other because of the example of the relationship between God and God's Son.

So Lent is our chance. It is our chance to deny the inclinations we have that insist we rely on ourselves alone, and it is our chance instead to ask for the help of others. It is our chance to deny the belief that society puts on us that we can 'pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps', that we can be 'self-made' women and men and that we are able to find out all the answers on our own.

Lent is our chance to embrace the truth that we can't live in this world, we can't live our lives as who we are created to be, without out being in relationship with one another. I am not me without you, and you are not you without us. We are because God is.

Denial of self? Indeed.