

## *Losing Yourself*

Stephen Van Kuiken  
North Congregational U.C.C.  
Columbus, Ohio  
March 26, 2023

*The ego is a veil between humans and God. —Rumi*

Ancient Witness: Mark 8:34-36

The reading this morning is a quote from Jesus. And whenever we have a quote from Jesus, we should pay particularly close attention, it seems to me. And this a quote that is repeated not once, not twice, not three or four times, but multiple times in the gospel writings! So you'd think that something that appears so many times would be well-known and a major focus among Jesus-followers. Yet, in most churches one hardly hears about this at all!

Perhaps this is true because this is such a hard, difficult message. It is quite the opposite of the prosperity gospel that is so popular in the churches these days. The prosperity gospel says that God can give you what you desire—like the proverbial Genie is a bottle. It is transactional: if you believe, if your faith is strong enough, then God will give you things, heal a disease, make you wealthy. It is centered around your ego desires—“just believe and you'll get what you want.”

But these words of Jesus are saying the opposite: “following means you'll get what you don't want!” Following means accepting pain and suffering; it means to let go of everything you have, everything you are. It means to lose your life—lose yourself. No wonder this is glossed over in the church. It is hardly a message that will stimulate church growth! But the churches—not just individuals—are hooked on the prosperity gospel, as well. We think, if we are faithful, then we will grow; we'll be successful. But Jesus has some news for us.

Jesus said, “If any want to become my follower, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” This isn't saying that we should seek out suffering for suffering's sake, with no purpose, but rather every person has a cross waiting for them, a moment of truth, a call to make a sacrifice, a hard and difficult path ahead of them, requiring everything.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian who challenged and stood against fascism in Germany in the 1930's was arrested, put in prison and eventually put to death by the Nazis, said it plainly: “If we refuse to take up our cross... we forfeit our fellowship with Christ and have ceased to follow him.”

Years ago, in their book, *Resident Aliens*, Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas wrote,

*Imagine, in a time of governmental persecution of the church, what an anguished decision it was for a Christian parent to seek baptism for a child. Was it fair of these first Christians to take their children down a path that might lead to their children's murder?*

*... We wish that there were some means of holding convictions without requiring the suffering of our friends and families.*

It's not surprising that the churches often ignore this hard, hard message. John Bright, in his classic book, *The Kingdom of God*, wrote,

*We enthrone that crucified Savior in stained glass, wood and stone—and in doctrine. To that cross we look for salvation. But we want that cross not at all. Indeed, we would have it the chief business of religion to keep crosses far away.*

And do we really don't believe what the cross teaches—that the pattern of death and resurrection is true for us, too, that we must die in some foundational way, or any talk about rebirth makes no sense. So, this message about losing our lives, losing our selves, is not just incidental to the spiritual path, to awakening, to union with God. This is *essential* to that path. The Sufi mystic and poet, Rumi, summed it up: "The ego is a veil between humans and God."

If we want that face-to-face encounter with the Sacred Presence, we need that path where we drop the ego, drop our desires, drop our game plan—where we say, not *my* will but *thy* will. Removing this veil between us and God is the primary goal of any authentic spirituality.

That wonderful spiritual teacher, Richard Rohr wrote,

*The ego is that part of the self that wants to be significant, central and important by itself, apart from anybody else. It wants to be both separate and superior. It is defended and self-protected by its very nature... The ego is what Jesus called an "actor," usually translated from the Greek as "hypocrite."*

Rohr continues,

*Jesus criticizes hypocrisy more than anything else. Jesus is never upset with sinners, but only with people who pretend they are not sinners... low-level religion can't see its own shadow and projects it elsewhere. Thus the high degree of morally judgmental people among most religious groups, which allows them to remain untouched in their self-sufficiency, militarism and materialism.*

So it is this self that we think we are—this self that we are pretending to be—it is this self that we must lose in order to remove the veil that separates us from God, and in order to truly find ourselves.

"Somehow our game has to fall apart," says Rohr, "However we've defined ourselves as successful, moral, better than, right, good, on top of it, number one... has to fail. It just has to."

Thomas Merton, that great spiritual genius, used the term "false self" in order to understand the meaning of Jesus' central teaching that we must die to ourselves or "lose ourselves to find ourselves."

What needs to die is this false self which is an imposter posing as me. It is a self that has been constructed and carefully protected by me. It is our separate self who we think we are. It is a social and mental construct.

Rohr says that this false self

*is probably necessary to get started, but it becomes problematic when we stop there and spend the rest of our lives promoting and protecting it. The small and separate self is merely a launching pad: our appearance, education, job, money, success, and so on. These are the trappings of ego that help us get through an ordinary day.*

So the separate self is not bad *per se*; it just doesn't go far enough and pretends to be more than it is. But if we want true freedom and liberation, we need to lose this self to find our True Self. We need to let go of this identity that we are so attached to. Rohr, "After you have spent many years building the separate, egoic self, with all of its labels and habits, you are very attached to it... to move beyond this privately concocted identity naturally feels like dying."

So this false self, what Rohr calls the separate self disconnected from Divine Love, is simply a substitute for our deepest truth. And the danger is when we think our separate self is all we are. So we hold onto it for dear life because that's the only life we think we have! But in order to allow the True Self to live freely and fully, our attachment to the false self must die. We must lose this self.

Jesus, of course, provides a model where he says that he "emptied himself"—the word is *kenosis* in the Greek—to find his identity in God.

Last week I said—and it bears repeating—that the 14th century mystic, Meister Eckhart who said, "God is not found in the soul by adding anything, but by a process of subtraction." We let go of everything we have held dear. Like the layers of an onion, everything is peeled away. All that is left is oneself and God. And what Jesus and the great spiritual teachers say is that we must die before we die. Let go of your individual self—how you define yourself—to discover the peace and liberation of your true identity. "Grace," says Rohr, "is always a humiliation for the ego."

Like Jesus, we can win by losing, we let humiliation dissolve our precious ego. Someone once said that we come to God not by doing it right; we come to God by doing it wrong. Not by achieving perfection, not by our goodness, but in our failures. Because that is when the veil drops. In our weakness we find our true strength said Paul. The ego hates this, but it's true.

By losing our selves, by dying to our selves, we can discover the Christ-reality. As Paul said, your real life is Christ. We discover, as the Buddhist say, the face we had before we were born. We find our True Self.

The Buddhists use the image of waves on the sea. Each of us is just one wave that comes out and goes back into the sea again. The false self is a wave that sees itself as separate from the sea. The True Self has come to realize that we are not just the wave; we are the ocean.

Friends, may we lose ourselves to find ourselves. May we let go into that universal oneness, into the oceanic love of God.

Amen.