

**Southport Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Steve Matthies**  
**Ash Wednesday**  
**February 25, 2009**

**Living in (Self) Denial**  
**Matthew 16:21-26**

In his delightful little book, *Orthodoxy*, written one hundred years ago, the renowned British author G. K. Chesterton tells this story:

Once I remember walking with a prosperous publisher, who made a remark which I had often heard before; it is, indeed, almost a motto of the modern world. Yet I had heard it once too often, and I saw suddenly that there was nothing in it. The publisher said of somebody, "That man will get on; he believes in himself." And I remember that as I lifted my head to listen, my eye caught [a bus] on which was written 'Hanwell.'

I said to him, "Shall I tell you where the men are who believe most in themselves? For I can tell you. I know of men who believe in themselves more colossally than Napoleon or Caesar. I know where flames the fixed star of certainty and success. I can guide you to the thrones of the Supermen. The men who really believe in themselves are all in lunatic asylums."

He said mildly that there were a good many men after all who believed in themselves and who were not in lunatic asylums.

"Yes, there are," I retorted, "and you of all men ought to know them. That drunken poet from whom you would not take a dreary tragedy, he believed in himself. That elderly minister with an epic from whom you were hiding in a back room, he believed in himself. If you consulted your business experience instead of your ugly individualistic philosophy, you would know that believing in himself is one of the commonest signs of a rotter. Actors who can't act believe in themselves; and debtors who won't pay. It would be much truer to say that a man will certainly fail, because he believes in himself. Complete self-confidence is not merely a sin; complete self-confidence is a weakness. Believing utterly in one's self is a hysterical and superstitious belief . . . : the man who has it has 'Hanwell' written on his face as plain as it is written on that [bus]."

And to all this my friend the publisher made this very deep and effective reply, "Well, if a man is not to believe in himself, in what is he to believe?"<sup>1</sup>

So there it stands as a grand call to all of us would-be enlightened types: *Believe in yourself*. It's a fascinating phrase, really. And as Chesterton points out, it really is "almost a motto of the modern world."

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<sup>1</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Image Books, 1959), 14.

I wonder, then, what Christianity and the church might look like in this modern mode. Here's something of the way it just might possibly look...

[Show "Me Worship for the Me Church" video clip.<sup>2</sup>]

Jesus' idea of his church, of course, is rooted in a very different understanding. Here's how Jesus himself spoke of the nature of the church, just after affirming that he is the one we are to believe in as the Messiah, the Son of the living God (**Matthew 16:13-20**):

**From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."**

**Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"<sup>3</sup>**

According to Matthew, Jesus begins to teach this message nearly continuously from this point on. The message is about his journey to Jerusalem and their journey of following him along the way.

But what is meant by such a journey? Why does he set out on it? There are several ways of exploring these questions, but this evening, at the beginning of Lent, I invite us to dwell for a few moments on what Jesus was getting at when he said that those who follow him would need to deny themselves.

Denial doesn't exactly have a good reputation, and we can certainly appreciate why. Most of us know what it's like to try to live in denial of our own sins and shortcomings, usually out of fear of what might happen were others to know what we've done. It's not a pleasant, fruitful, flourishing way to live. And certainly Jesus is not encouraging us to live in denial in that sense; quite the opposite.

Nor is Jesus suggesting that we shouldn't care about our own lives, or that we should neglect our health or well being. Jesus' instruction might sound, on the surface at least, like a kind of masochism. But the fullness of Jesus' teachings about God's love for us and the importance of our love for each other as we love ourselves shows that isn't what he means, either.

What Jesus counsels is that we live in self denial, and that is an altogether different sort of thing than avoiding the truth about ourselves or neglecting or even negating ourselves.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9dvVp0Nxjo>.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 16:21-26.

To get what he means by self denial, the bigger picture of what his own life was all about is needed. His own life, he says, was governed by a necessity, a purpose that had to be realized, that came from beyond him. That is the deep message he stressed over and over again. So Matthew tells us that Jesus regularly showed his disciples that he “must” go to Jerusalem. What Jesus means when he calls his followers to deny themselves is clarified by this little word “must.”

All through the New Testament Gospels Jesus is shown on a mission. He comes not on his own initiative, but because his heavenly Father sends him. He has work to do, he tells his friends, that his Father has given him to do. He speaks only what his Father in heaven tells him to speak. He calls those whom God puts it in mind after much prayer that he should invite to join him on his mission. Day after day, week in and week out, Jesus is listening not to the sound of his own heart, not to his own inner voice. He’s not up before dawn each day just to get in touch with himself. He’s listening to the one voice that matters above all, and that finally sets the course of his journey, the voice of the one true living God. And so we finally stand in the shadows, a bit sleepy by now, too, like his other followers, and watch wistfully or maybe even nervously as huge drops of sweat form on his brow and we hear him saying the fateful words, “Not my will, but yours be done.”

So when Jesus says of those who would follow him, “Let them deny themselves,” he wants them to do exactly what he has done—to submit their own plans, intentions, and purposes to God’s. He’s not for one moment calling them to believe in themselves. He’s lifting their gaze so that they ponder and seek and learn to align themselves with the things of God and therefore believe in him. He wants them, too, to utter his own life’s prayer to the most high God: “Not my will, but your will be done.”

This is precisely what God’s most well known and primal resister was unwilling to do. Anthony Esolen, a modern translator of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, describes what Dante saw when Virgil, his guide in this vision, led him to the bottom of hell.<sup>4</sup> There was Satan, frozen in place, stuck in the icy river Cocytus, one of the five rivers of Hades, and unable to get free. A three-headed monster, he had Judas Iscariot headfirst in one mouth, and Brutus and Cassius feet first in the other two. Dante himself described what he saw this way:

*Beneath each face extended two huge wings,  
large enough to suffice for such a bird.  
I never saw a sail at sea so broad.  
They had no feathers, but were black and scaled  
like a bat’s wings, and those he flapped, and flapped,  
and from his flapping raised three gales that swept Cocytus, and reduced it all to ice.*

“Consider the flapping of those wings,” Esolen says. It is natural for earthbound human beings to see in the flight of birds a symbol of freedom—a disconnection with the earth. If we could fly, we think with our misty apprehension of infinity, we could make contact with a terrestrial world only when and where we wanted. We should be princes of the air.

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<sup>4</sup> Anthony Esolen, “The Freedom of Heaven and the Freedom of Hell,” *First Things*, March 2009, No. 191:37-41.

“Yet it is that very motion of the wings that raises the gale above the River Cocytus and freezes Satan in his place, along with all the other traitors. If he could cease to move those wings, the gale would subside and the Cocytus would melt. In other words, if he could cease to act on his own will to rise, he would be able to rise...

What Dante is showing us, Esolen suggests, is “that the punishment” God enacts “*is the sin* repeated endlessly and inexorably.”

He then goes on to ask, “What exactly, then is the sin made manifest here in hell’s deepest pit? The flapping of wings, the ice, the act of treachery, and the temptation of Satan that penetrates time all derive from falling to the temptation, ‘Ye shall be as gods . . .’

“All things, says the psalmist, declare that ‘he made us; we did not make ourselves . . .’

“To claim, then, that we *did* make ourselves would be to deny the real contingency of our beings—which would also be to deny the web of relations into which we have entered by our being and without which we must cease to be. Deep at the heart of this denial is the prideful sin of ingratitude. We see that we are provided with what we could not have provided for ourselves: not only the material conditions that support our existence—our food and drink, the care of our parents—but the fact of our existence itself. Yet we respond with a lie. We repeat what Satan implicitly affirms at the bottom of hell, the loneliest words ever uttered: ‘I am my own, I am my own! My mind is my own, to fashion what truth I shall please. My will is my own. I rise—*by my power*. I exist—*by my power*.’”

With keen insight, Esolen then suggests that “Satan’s lie . . . is also Satan’s mistake. He who is not God wants to be God, to rise by his own power and be his own. But God is his own precisely in his love—in his *being for*. ‘You should be as gods,’ Satan says to Eve, and he unwittingly speaks the truth. We should be as gods, and we can be, in gratitude and humility and love. For the outpouring of a grateful heart, which loves because it receives what it has not deserved, reflects the exuberant power of God, who loves into existence beings whom he does not need. And the self-emptying that is essential to love—the humble willingness to acknowledge that, as we did not make ourselves, we do not exist *for ourselves*—reflects the plenitude of God, who in his creation deigns to put himself at the disposal of the contingent beings he loves.”

And that is what Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem is all about. It shows us Jesus putting himself at our disposal—quite literally, finally, on the cross, as he is disposed of as a nuisance—because of his great self-giving love for us, his creatures. And he does so, he says, because this *must* happen as a working out of his Father’s will to save and heal and bless.

That is his “must,” to which Jesus all along the journey, and then finally, agonizingly in the garden, bends his will. And as his followers it is a call that extends to us, too, that we might bend our wills to God’s will, following Jesus in self-giving love toward God and for others.

Chesterton ends his book *Orthodoxy*, which is simply his probing yet joyful explanation of why he believes the Christian message, with these reflections:

All the real argument about religion turns on the question of whether a man who was born upside down can tell when he comes right way up. The primary paradox of Christianity is that the ordinary condition of man is not his sane or sensible condition; that the normal itself is an abnormality. That is the inmost philosophy of the Fall. In Sir Oliver Lodge's interesting new Catechism, the first two questions were: "What are you?" and "What, then, is the meaning of the Fall of Man?" I remember amusing myself by writing my own answers to the questions; but I soon found that they were very broken and agnostic answers. To the question, "What are you?" I could only answer, "God knows." And to the question, "What is meant by the Fall?" I could answer with complete sincerity, "That whatever I am, I am not myself." This is the prime paradox of our religion; something that we have never in any full sense known, is not only better than ourselves, but even more natural to us than ourselves.<sup>5</sup>

And that, finally, I suspect, is why Jesus is so concerned that those of us who seek to follow him should live lives of self denial. What we are denying is something that must give way if we are ever to affirm what we will find as its replacement, so to speak. **"We are God's children now,"** Scripture tells us. **"What we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).**

There is a deep grace in the call to turn away from that dread opponent of the God of love, who flaps his wings in a furious hold on what he thinks is his own self to feverishly keep and protect, and instead to follow the grounded steps of the one whose journey needs no wings, but only the hands of the one to whom he bent his will, lifting him out of the grave to new life and new joy.

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<sup>5</sup> Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 158.