

“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it” (Part One)

Reflection 4 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

Now in our series of reflections on “Salvation: The Quest” we come to a watershed of sorts. We move on from the Old Testament to the New Testament, remembering now that long before there were any well-developed notions of afterlife there were robust notions of salvation. Salvation meant rescue, deliverance, healing, safety and wellness, and those remain base-line understandings of salvation.

Now we come to a text, Matthew 16:21-28, that answers the question: What then must we do to be saved? In a series on salvation, that is a big question. Sooner or later we realize that we are lost – that at least in some sense we are lost. We are not who we wish we were. We’ve lost track of our lives and where they are going. In fact, we have no idea where they’re headed. We have done things we know we shouldn’t have. We keep doing things we know we shouldn’t. And the feeling that comes over us then when we face all this, when we honestly face all this, is lostness. And the question that comes then is, “What then must we do to be saved?”

There are a number of time-honored answers to that question, like baptism, or doing this or doing that, or believing this or believing that. And so this text is going to throw a huge curve-ball at us. I come to my dark night of the soul, and I cry out, “How do I save myself?” and this text will answer, “By denying yourself.” Immediately we will protest. Right? We can’t love others until we’ve learned to love ourselves. Right? And there’s a bit of truth to that.

But still Jesus says: It all starts with denying yourself. The context is this: Peter has just declared of Jesus, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (in Matthew 16:16). And now we read beginning in verse 21, “From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” From that time on ...

With this verse, we come to a turning point in Matthew’s gospel and in Jesus’ life. And we become aware quickly that all that stuff in the Sermon on the Mount (back in chapters 5-7) is not in the least abstract: turning the other cheek; going the second mile; trusting God whatever happens; forgiving again and again and again; not giving in to anger; loving your enemies. These are not platitudes. They’re part of the fabric of life itself, so much so that we won’t make it without these truths. I won’t. You won’t. Our society won’t. Our nation won’t. They’re the key to life itself. And now for Jesus very personally they become primal truths.

Peter (newly designated Rock Man in the verses just before; that’s what “Peter” means, Rocky) doesn’t get it. In fact, he hates what he’s hearing, and he rebukes Jesus, “Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you – all this talk about suffering. Never, Lord! You’re the Messiah. Yours is the power and the glory.” Jesus has heard that voice

before. Back in time. Out in the wilderness of Judea. So he turns to Peter (in verse 23) and says, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me. You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

Because, Peter, there is no way but the way of the cross. Salvation depends on this. Only the cross can heal humanity’s brokenness. Only the cross. Life works exactly the opposite of how you think it works. The power is in sacrificial love always! It’s in the worst moments of your life. It’s in death itself.

So Jesus says (in verse 24), “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself.” He must renounce self as the center of life and action. He must renounce self as the center of the universe. And of course this goes against almost everything our culture, especially our culture, tells us. There may have never been an age as focused on self as ours. We worship self. And the worst things we ever do in life, we do because we worship self.

And yet what is the self? What is it? What is this self that society says we should promote, express and exalt to the highest place? Try to describe your real self – the core “you.” What exactly is it? Quick! I ask, “Who are you? No, who are you really?” How do you answer? What exactly is the self? Is it your name? Your age? Your gender? Your job, what you do for a living? Your fears? Your dreams? Your beliefs or even your behavior patterns? Is it your personality? What is the core you? Any idea? So we have built a whole culture on this thing called self when we have very little idea what it even is.

Jon Kabat-Zinn in his classic book *Wherever You Go There You Are* introduces the concept of Selfing. Selfing is the way we construct out of almost everything and every situation an “I”, a “me”, and a “mine,” and then operate in the world from that limited perspective which turns out to be mostly fantasy and defense. If you really think about it, you will see, he says, that what we call “the self” is really a construct of our own mind, and hardly a permanent one either. This “I” construct is continually dissolving and reconstructing itself, always slightly differently, virtually moment by moment. So it’s no wonder that we so easily feel put down or diminished, small, insecure and uncertain, since the existence of “self” is so fragile.

Jesus is saying, “For life to work you have to shift your spiritual center of gravity off your self.” You can’t be thinking all the time, “Why me?” “Why is this happening to me?” “How could they do this to me?” Thinking that way is a prescription for misery. Every really unhappy person sees every conversation, every encounter, every relationship only from their own perspective. And Jesus is saying that it doesn’t work.

Now, he is not saying to hate your self. He is not suggesting that we should have a poor self-image. He is suggesting, I think, that we be so little focused on ourselves that we can’t feel poorly about ourselves. It would never occur to us to think poorly of ourselves.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week