

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

Reflection 5 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

The way to save myself is to lose myself. So Jesus says in Matthew 16:21-28. Nothing more counter-intuitive or more universally true has ever been said. To expand upon this truth Jesus (in verse 25) begins to work off of the Greek word *psyche* [anglicized], an ambiguous word translated by “life” or “soul” or “self.” In fact the NIV translates it twice as “life” in verse 25 and then twice as “soul” in verse 26, but in all four cases, it’s the same word, *psyche*. Jesus says, “For whoever wants to save his psyche (his life/his self) will lose it, but whoever loses his psyche (his life/his self) for me will find it,” meaning that a person can only achieve a full life when he or she no longer clings to it, that a person can only find his or her self when he or she is no longer absorbed with it. It’s like Bette Midler’s song, “The Rose”:

It’s the heart afraid of breaking
that never learns to dance,
It’s the dream afraid of waking
that never takes a chance.

It’s the one who won’t be taken
who cannot seem to give,
And the soul afraid of dying
that never learns to live.

And this is universally, timelessly true. The very best things in life you never get by aiming directly at them, or you never keep by holding desperately on to them, whether it be happiness, or peace, or the love of another person. So it is with this fragile lovely little thing called the self or soul.

Meanwhile we live out an ancient story told around the campfires of ancient Greece. It’s the tale of Narcissus who saw his own image in a pool one day and instantly fell in love with it. He became obsessed with his own perfection. And so he kept looking at himself in the water’s mirror, always looking at himself, and slowly he wasted away and died.

Like Narcissus, we become obsessed with our own image, and we have no room in our minds to really love anyone else. We devote so much of our time and energy to defending our own perfection, hiding our shame, explaining away our imperfections, and reacting angrily or fearfully to every imagined slight. Our every disappointment or setback is catastrophic. And we would rather lose our children, lose our friends, lose our church, even lose our faith than have our image tarnished. We do this as individuals, and we do this as a nation. And slowly our life force wastes away, and of course we feel lost and need somehow to be saved.

The truth is – and it’s taught in all world literature and mythology – that in every culture the really creative acts are understood to involve some sort of dying to self. Deep down inside, we have always known that. Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... And Others Don’t* identifies eleven companies who outperformed the market almost seven times over, over a period of 15 years. He found that in every case their leaders were self-effacing, quiet, reserved, even shy, and that they hardly ever talked about themselves. There were no Donald Trumps.

Jesus goes on (in verse 26), “What good will it be for a person if he gains the whole world yet forfeits his soul, his psyche, his real life, who he really is, his inner life?” What matters is this inner life that is created step by step by doing good things, small acts of kindness, sometimes heroic sacrifices, but more often just a cup of cold water given, an encouraging word, a smile, a judgment withheld, a promise kept, a duty fulfilled, a mercy extended, a wrong forgiven, so that step by step a great soul is created. And all of this is part of salvation.

But what happens, Jesus, says (in verse 26), if a person gains the whole world, if he’s Alexander the Great, and one day discovers there’s no one home inside? You find yourself by losing yourself, by getting out from under the pressure of having the details of your own life be central to the operation of the universe so that every outcome, decision, success, failure seems so deadly important. Only the soul set free from agonizing self-consciousness is fully free to explore and participate in the world beyond the self. Only such a soul is free to see, to understand and to love. As long as you are obsessed with your own security, or your reputation, or your worldly success, or how you come across, or even your own spiritual journey, you are not available either to give yourself to others or even to be kind to yourself.

On the other hand, the mature soul is animated by trust, and it is this that sets him or her free from restrictive self-consciousness. Now she or he can be under-appreciated, or under-valued, or even criticized unfairly and still stay calm, centered in God’s loving presence. But only when we are loosened from the bondage, the tyranny, of our own egos, are we truly free, are we truly saved. Only then can we live in the moment, enjoying the moment without needing to hold on to it. Only then can we feel happiness without needing the happiness to continue. Only then can we recapture the feeling we had a child when we woke up and morning smiled. Every morning. Remember how we were enchanted by the most ordinary things. Do you remember that first box of colored crayons, the smell, the magic of all those colors, the things you could do with them? Do you remember your first leaf collection, how you just loved the different colors and shapes and textures and forms? Do you remember when life was magic because you simply took things as they were? Jon Kabat-Zinn writes, “If you stop trying to make yourself into more than you are out of fear that you are less than you are, whoever you really are will be a lot lighter and happier, and easier to live with, too.”

And you will have discovered in a very real sense salvation, what it means to be one with God, to live in the divine flow, to be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. It all begins with denying the self and reaching out to others. We are not the central players in

this story. We are not the stars. We are not the heroes. And Jesus is saying that as long as we think we are the stars, the central actors, we will never even find ourselves.

So to what are we being called? Let's go back to the text, verse 24, to the words of Jesus, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." This means to renounce self certainly as the center of your reality, to not insist on everything going your way. This means to take up your cross. And your cross is all voluntary. Your cross is not just something that happens to you. Your cross is something you take up. Your cross is something you choose to do that has a price in pain. Maybe it's a life task that is yours – a calling, a challenge, a quest, that's going to cost you. Maybe it means there are some other things you now cannot do. Maybe it means there are some other choices you now cannot make.

But deny yourself,
take up your cross,
and follow Jesus.

Then here's the promise. Here is salvation.

"Whoever loses his life,
whoever loses his soul,
whoever loses his self,
for Jesus,
will find it."

– Dale Pauls