

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Aug 8th 2014

I feel like today's Gospel (in conjunction with yesterday's) has a lot to say to us about expectations. Yesterday, Simon Peter recognized Jesus as the Son of the living God, but his expectations of what that meant were so far off base that Jesus, shortly after calling him blessed, likened Peter to Satan. That was quite a transition! The reason for such an about-face is made clear at the end of Matthew 16:23: "You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."

Today we read the development of that thread. Jesus tells his disciples that anyone who wishes to follow the path of discipleship must "deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." This idea of denying oneself is an interesting one. It's easy to think that it's just about reigning in my own selfish desires, but there is another way to approach the idea. One definition of the word deny is "to disavow or disown." Is Jesus asking me to disown myself, as if I've done something terrible and unforgiveable? Well, not quite in that way. But Jesus is asking me to disown my self-centered ideas which lead me into thinking that I am all that matters, that my own needs and hopes are more important than anyone else's, and that my way of looking at life and the world should supersede everyone else's. Jesus is telling me to deny my own centrality and self-aggrandizing ways in order to focus on loving God with all my heart and my neighbor as myself. Then I will be starting to think as God does.

This shift in attitude also has practical implications; it does indeed lead to reigning in my selfish desires, as I mentioned earlier. When I stop seeing myself as the ultimate good or the center of the universe, then I lose interest in searching endlessly for wealth, prestige, and influence and power over others. I am also able to recognize when I begin to think more as a human being does than as God does. I can see when my humor is meant to simply bring attention to myself, rather than joy to others; I notice when I put down other people, however subtly, in order to make myself look good; I realize when a disagreement with someone in a meeting is not about substance but just wanting to appear to have all the answers. These are the signposts that remind me to deny myself in my daily life.

And when I build a habit of doing this, I don't seek to care for others or treat them with respect because I "should" or because I want to make God happy and get to heaven. No, I do those things because it's who I am. Now THAT is truly thinking as God does! It's not a question of should but rather a question of fully living life itself, the gift of life that God has given to us. Jesus asks, "What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" I think this is the core of what Jesus says to us today. I don't think he means physically dying when he speaks of forfeiting life. Instead, he is reminding us that a self-centered life is only a shadow of the full life that is offered to us when we seek the mind of God.

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