

Finding One's Self Identity and Individuality

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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Jesus said, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:34-35).

In Buddhism the ultimate goal of life in this world is to be so perfected (by countless reincarnations if necessary) as to enter, finally, into a blissful union with the Divine, a state that is called nirvana, and that involves the complete elimination of any sense of self or personal identity. In fact the word, nirvana, comes from the Sanskrit meaning *extinction*, specifically the extinction of illusion – suffering, desire *and the sense of self* all being forms of illusion.

Now there are passages in our doctrines that speak of our sense of self in somewhat this way: we all have, we are taught, a *feeling*, based on an *appearance*, that life is our own, whereas the truth is that the Lord alone is life, and He gives us His life to feel *as if it were our own*. At first blush this seems an awful lot like an illusion. But illusion carries the connotation of something misleading, and yet we know that the Lord lets us feel His life *as if it were our own* because of His infinite love for us *as creatures separate from Himself*, and so it is a good thing that He *intends* for us, and not something that will ever be extinguished.

In fact, we read, "the essence of Divine love is to love others outside itself..." (TCR 43), and so our sense of identity and individuality apart from the Infinite is necessary for God Himself to be fulfilled, and we are blessed indeed to be able to receive that love as unique individuals.

And we are unique. Each one of us is created through the marvelous organizing power of influx from the spiritual world, the building blocks of DNA and the absolutely unduplicatable conditions of time and space that make even identical twins different. Each of us is built with the potential for a distinct and local use in the great economy of heaven, a special niche in the spiritual body of the Grand Man, a sense of satisfaction and delight that differentiates us from every other being ever created *or ever to be created*.

And yet the Lord's words in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are still true: there is something about this life we experience that has to be let go – no, more than this, denied and rejected – if we are to receive all the joy and fulfilment He offers us. What is this, and what is the new life that may be found in its place?

In his book, "The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People," Stephen Covey notes that we all enter into life as babies completely dependent on our parents or caregivers - for our very survival. Gradually through our childhood and youth we strive increasingly to be independent of others and to do our own thing under our own initiative. Only in mature adult life do we finally learn that the key to happiness is neither of these extremes but instead a sense of interdependence in which we know that we have a contribution to make to others and that they also provide things we need and can't get without them. So we learn to live co-operatively rather than in constant

competition. We rejoice in our abilities but we also acknowledge our needs and learn to trust others to help fulfil them.

What does this have to do with the teaching about self-denial? – well, essentially it is a good framework for understanding what it is that we have to give up in order to be truly fulfilled, and that is the arrogance or conceit that we can know, feel, perceive or do anything good by ourselves without the love, wisdom and power of the Lord – either as it comes to us directly from Him or as it comes to us through others in heaven or on earth.

There is no such thing as a self-made man or woman. Even the billionaire businessman relies on the confidence, the connections, the co-operation and the cash of others to make his business succeed, and that's not even addressing all the opportunities provided through the circumstances of birth, upbringing, education and experience among others. Of course, the successful person has to take advantage of these circumstances and that often takes special talent, but we ALL have special talent, it's just a matter of what the people around us recognize and reward.

The key to fulfilment is therefore not what we have innately or inherently within ourselves, but what we receive and take in from outside of ourselves. Sometimes this is a matter of choice, and sometimes it is not. The person who says, "I can do it all myself, my own way" is really just deluding himself.

But now, back to the Lord's own words about self-denial. Most of the passages we read for the children's talk speak about losing life and thereby **saving** it. In Matthew, chapter 10, we find a slight variation: there we read, "He who **finds** his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will **find** it" (v.39). The losing is done through self-sacrifice; the saving or finding is done by serving the Lord. But really, how does this work? And what's the difference between the life lost and the life gained? Can you recognize this difference in yourself? What about others? What does it feel like to lose your life – and then find it?

No doubt we all know what it's like to lose something that has been precious to us, whether it's a material object, or a particular vision of how we feel our lives should be, or perhaps a loved one who is no longer with us. The grief can be surprising, even shocking, and of course our first reactions may be forms of denial, or anger, or bargaining, much of which involves blaming other people, God or circumstances for our loss. Then there may be twinges of guilt followed perhaps by resignation as we begin to contemplate how we are going to move forward. Finally acceptance of the fact of our loss allows us to make new plans, develop new associations, and effectively start a new life. It can be a sad and wrenching process. *We call it temptation.*

But here's the thing. In temptations we do not suffer the loss of any ideals; the ideals are still there – as ideals. What we suffer is the loss of personal satisfaction on the natural, material plane. And if the loss is unrecoverable there are only two ways out of our suffering: one is to develop new attachments that replace the old ones – which may be a very good choice or simply a way of distracting ourselves from the pain; the other, in a word, is to go deeper.

Now we all know what the doctrines teach about palliative cures. If you just treat the symptoms and never address the cause of an illness it will generally only get worse, and break out in new

and unexpected ways. But if you can get at the cause you can gradually end the suffering. And so it must be said that the real cure for worldly disappointments is not the addition of more worldly things. Rather it is to go deeper, either to see a cause within one's self and address it, or simply to practice new spiritual disciplines that bring fulfilment at a deeper level. In other words, it is to exchange the happiness of external life for the happiness of internal life – something we are all going to have to do sooner or later if we expect to live in heaven.

This in fact is what the process of regeneration is all about. But we should add this fact as well, that when we get the spiritual right within ourselves then it is much more likely that the Lord can also add the blessings of natural life, even if they are completely different from anything we might have expected or planned for. Remember Solomon and his prayer for wisdom.

As for the process of regeneration, Scripture and the Writings describe it almost in terms of a heart transplant. We read in Ezekiel this morning about the corruption of the people of Israel, which is only representative of the corruption in our own lives. This corruption (selfishness, worldliness, and all the associated evil) is compared to filthiness which the Lord can remove from us if we are willing, and to a *stony heart* (think of arteriosclerosis if it helps) that has to be replaced by a *heart of flesh*, that is, a new attitude, a new will, a new primary motivating love.

The old will is defective. It can't be repaired. It has to be replaced. So our concern for ourselves has to be replaced by concern for others, as inspired by the Lord. Is the operation easy? - no. Is it painful? - yes. We may have to get on life support mechanisms (provided maybe by the church and community) during the transition. But when we recover everything is new and improved.

Does this mean we give no consideration to ourselves? – Of course not; we spoke of that in a recent sermon on self-esteem. We can't be useful to anyone else unless we have some self-respect and take care of ourselves. Nor can we lie down and become doormats for other people to walk on. That is not helpful for them or us and it betrays all the principles of mutual respect for the good and truth are in and with us from the Lord.

But what we CAN do is let go, or LOSE the preoccupation with self, and instead let the goodness and truth that is in us from the Lord shine forth, inspiring new ideas, new affections, new feelings of usefulness to others, and a new sense of personal fulfilment that makes our old way of living seem hollow by comparison.

Only when we lose this can the Lord fill the void with something better; only when we lose this can the pure energy that had been locked away and constrained by that protective, defensive focus emerge so that we FIND what was in fact there all along, hidden like treasure in a field or like the germ of the wheat that breaks forth and sprouts when the husk or the chaff of the berry falls away.

Will this change our personalities? Will it cause us to lose our sense of identity? – Well, it could if it all happened too fast or suddenly. That is why the Lord never forces the process but provides that it takes place in measured steps according to our own free will and determination. In fact, a surprising teaching of the New Church is that the Lord specifically provides for the evil spirits who flow into our thoughts and affections reinforcing and contributing to the feeling that

our life is our own, and yet He causes these same spirits to withdraw from us when we make the decision and commitment to live differently – for His sake and the gospel's. So the changes in our personalities, which may or may not be obvious to others, will be simple, honest reflections of the people we really want to be and in fact are becoming.

There are lots of stories of people or things being lost and then found in the Word. The parable of the prodigal son is one (from Luke 15), and is told in the context of two other such stories - the lost sheep and the lost coin. The things that were lost in these stories were not different from the things that were found, but in the case of the young man a new attitude emerged after he wasted his inheritance and ran out of money. Isn't this obviously symbolic of our own realization that money can't buy happiness, or rather, to see into it more deeply, that the pursuit of our own outward pleasure doesn't really satisfy?

The Lord says, "Don't worry about your life and all the things YOU need." He knows you need them. "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matt 6:33). "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matt. 7:7).

OUR life is not really our own. It is His in us. But it is infinitely generous, and given to us in such a way that we have the freedom and can take the responsibility *as if of ourselves* to be the kind of people we want to be – inward-looking or outward-looking, natural or spiritual, anxious or faithful, cynical or kind. Whatever we choose, the Lord is with us, but if choose not to open up to His love it will remain locked away inside of us, buried, out of sight, unappreciated and unable to convey its blessings – to ourselves or anyone else.

On the other hand if we do open up and let our material concerns fall away the Lord is adamant and insistent throughout the Word that He will show us the more rewarding heavenly life that we have been missing.

Amen.

Lessons: Matt. 16:24-26, Mark 8:34-35, Luke 9:23-24 and John 12:20-26
Children's talk on losing one life to gain another (the grain of wheat)

Ezekiel 36:16-36
Divine Love & Wisdom #115-116 (& DP 42)