Sunday, February 24, 1991
WINNING BY LOSING
Mark 8:31-38

“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 and for the sake of the Gospel will save it.” — Mark 8:34-35

“Take up your cross — deny yourself"—and you can win by losing: What did Jesus mean when he issued this invitation to those who wanted to follow him? This is not the kind of suggestion that we normally hear in our everyday lives. When was the last time you saw an advertisement or heard a commercial that asked you to deny yourself, to put others first, to delay your gratification, to put off buying something that you really wanted until you could afford it or pay cash, or to not buy it at all, even though you had the money, because you didn’t need it?

We might even think that people who deny themselves are strange. Did you see this letter to “Dear Abby” some time ago?

“Dear Abby: We live in one of the best neighborhoods in town. There is not one house on our block worth less than $75,000. Some new neighbors moved in next door, and I understand they bought the house and paid cash. They seem very nice, but they are weird. The first thing we noticed was that they didn’t have a television antenna, so my little boy asked their little boy about it, and he was told they didn’t have a television set. They have only one automobile (and a two-car garage) and the father takes the bus to work every day so the children and the mother can use the car. They rarely go anywhere except to church. The wife doesn’t have any fancy clothes or jewelry or furs. The children aren’t permitted to have any toys dealing with violence. Could they belong to some offbeat religious cult? What do you make of them?”

Abby’s answer was: “Maybe they’ve just got cash, conservative standards, high moral principles, and ideals. They sound like ideal neighbors to me.”

Do you know many people who truly deny themselves, who practice deferred gratification? Isn’t it true that most of the time we are urged in our culture to think of ourselves first, to put ourselves first, to pay attention to our own desires first, to buy now and worry about paying for it later? A best-selling book a few years ago had the title, “I’m Number One.” The present generation has been called “the ME generation.” It’s as if we’re all the time being urged to be proud of our greed.

Do not misunderstand. When Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, he did not mean that we are to treat ourselves as unworthy. He did not mean that we are to have no self-esteem or self-worth. He did not mean that we are not to love ourselves.

Self-denial, for Christians, has never been a way of saying that matter is evil, that the human body is bad, or that bodily pleasures are not to be enjoyed.

And when we talk about taking up our cross, we usually mean something different than what Jesus meant when he invited us to do so. In times of adversity, we’ve all heard people in a whiny voice say, “Well, I guess this is my cross to bear.” One day I overheard a woman say, “My aging mother is a helpless invalid and is very dependent on me. I can’t spend much time away from her. This may continue for years. I guess it’s my cross to bear.” And a man said, “I

was injured on the job last year and now it looks as if I'm permanently disabled. I guess it's my cross to bear." Without lacking sympathy for these individuals, this is not what Jesus had in mind when he invited those who wanted to follow him to "take up their cross."

We know how in everyday conversation people frequently speak of personal problems that have come their way as "a cross to bear." Sooner or later, everybody's got something they could complain about. That's the nature of human existence. Life is difficult. But if their so-called "cross to bear" is involuntary, that is, if it is not something they have voluntarily chosen to do because of the meaning it gives to their lives and the lives of others, then it's not their cross to bear in the way that Jesus meant it. Certainly, the involuntary suffering that many people endure throughout their lives deserves our sympathy, but a better label for it would be their "thorn in the flesh." That's the metaphor that St. Paul uses to describe whatever disability he had to put up with throughout his life. We don't know what his physical or emotional problem was because he doesn't tell us, but we do know it was something he did not choose and from which he hoped God would deliver him, but he had to live with it anyway.

What then did Jesus mean when he invited those early followers to deny themselves, to take up their cross, and to lose their lives so that they could find their lives? And what does it mean for us today?

Jesus was saying, in the first place, that although the self is very important, it also needs always to realize its connection with others and with God, and that we need to consciously choose to commit ourselves to something greater than self. We need to have a higher loyalty than pure selfishness. When we make a commitment and devote our time, money, and energy to a worthy ideal, then we are drawn out of ourselves, and we continue to grow spiritually. If we do not commit ourselves to something greater, then we shrink and diminish, and life loses its meaning and worth. Our mental health also falls apart.

Dr. M. Scott Peck, in his book, People of the Lie, puts it this way:

"Mental health requires that the human will submit itself to something higher than itself. To function decently in this world, we must submit ourselves to some principle that takes precedence over what we might want at any given moment. For the religious, this principle is God, and so they will say, 'Thy will, not mine, be done.' But if they are sane, the non-religious submit themselves, whether they know it or not, to some higher power, be it truth or love, the needs of others or the demands of reality."

"The utter failure to submit oneself to reality is called autism. The word comes from the Greek root, auto, meaning self. The person who is autistic is oblivious to certain essential dimensions of reality. Such people literally live in a world of their own in which the self reigns supreme."

Jesus knew, as modern psychology has confirmed, that each one of us is made up of many selves. There is our mean self, our selfish self, our unselfish self, our rational self, our intuitive self, and many more. There is the self that whispers, "Satisfy your every desire; you deserve it." There is the self that urges us to do our duty, the self that says, "You only live once," and the self that says, "This is not right." In transactional analysis, we are told there is a self which is the child in us, the self that is the parent in us, and the self that is the adult in us.

Isn't it true that the people we truly revere, the heroes, heroines, and saints in our history, are those who have given themselves over to ideas and principles that were greater than and outside themselves? They are the people who have been able to rise above their basic selves

and selfish desires. They subdued greed or lust for power or envy and covetousness and have been able to live and die for an ideal that could never be realized in their own time.

These are the people who have found a deep center of living, a frame of reference outside themselves, which brought the many selves within them into harmony.

The point is, as Jesus also knew, as individual human beings, we are not and cannot be our own frame of reference. This is what Jesus was trying to make clear to his disciples and to us when he invited them and us to "deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him." In this way, he went on to say, "we win by losing." "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."

It's another way of saying that we need to be true to something greater than ourselves — something which draws us out of ourselves even when it goes against the grain of some of our basic desires and appetites.

Note secondly, this principle of denying oneself, of losing oneself in order to accomplish something greater, applies to all of life. It has to do with discipline and hard work. It has to do with unselfishness and committing ourselves to the finest of which we are capable. It has to do with a commitment to excellence in all things.

A few years ago, the University of Chicago conducted a five-year study of leading artists, athletes, and scholars. Conducted by Dr. Benjamin Bloom, the research was based on anonymous interviews with the top twenty performers in various fields. These people included concert pianists, Olympic swimmers, tennis players, sculptors, mathematicians, and neurologists. Dr. Bloom and his associates probed for clues as to how these people approached excellence. For a more complete picture, they interviewed their families and teachers.

The report stated conclusively that drive and determination, not great natural talent, led to the extraordinary success of these individuals. The report said, "We expected to find tales of great natural gifts. We didn't find these at all." Their parents often said it was another child who had the greater talents. What they found were extraordinary accounts of individuals who had given their lives over to something greater than themselves. The pianist who practiced many hours a day for seventeen years; the swimmer who rolled out of bed every morning at half-past five to do laps for two hours before school.

In a similar way, a recent study of outstanding student violinists showed that the number of hours spent practicing was the only thing that separated potential music superstars from others who were good but not top caliber. An older violinist who was considered tops in his profession was once called a genius by a famous critic. "Genius," he snorted. "For 37 years I've practiced 14 hours a day, and now they call me a genius."

The secret, of course, is not only in working hard, in having the right discipline, but working hard at the right things.

Thus far, I've made two main points—(1) When Jesus calls upon us to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him, he was saying that although the self is very important, it also needs always to realize its connection with others and with God, and (2) this principle applies to all of life so that when we truly begin to lose our life in a higher purpose, when we begin to

give our life away, then we win, we find our life. We win by losing. We win because our self, our life, is stretched, pulled, and enlarged, rather than narrowed, shriveled, and turned inward.

The third point is this: the natural product of this kind of self-denial and the willing taking up of a cross, adopting a discipline, and losing one's life — is a new joy. This kind of cross-bearing, this kind of losing, is not a sad, grim, unhappy process.

Dr. Arthur Tuuri retired a few years back in Flint, Michigan. Early in his career as a physician, he helped a mother who, having given birth, died. He cared for the baby until it was adopted. From that, he started The Flint Area Health Foundation, a home for needy children. For years he was head of the Mott Children's Health Center, which helps with medical and dental care. Dr. Tuuri said, "Many people have asked me why I devote my life to the poor and disadvantaged when I could be in private practice and a wealthy man. I tell them knowing from whence I came and the fact that the greatest healer of all time, Jesus, said, 'When you do it unto the least of these, you have done it to me.' It has brought me a life of joy that I could not have imagined."

The greatest time in our life is when we begin to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow the One who has set the example for all humanity. It is when we rise above our desires and give ourselves over to something greater. Then we truly win by losing. Amen.