Sunday, February 23, 1997
WHAT IT MEANS TO DENY YOURSELF
Mark 8:31-38

In the first sermon of this series last week, we learned that the teachings of Jesus often give us new paradigms for understanding God, ourselves, and our relationships with others. The title of that sermon was "What It Means To Repent." We discovered that the call to repent is much more than being sorry for our sins. It includes the invitation to question our old assumptions about God, the world, and others. To repent means to be willing to turn our life around and go in a new direction.

Today, in the second sermon in this series, we will examine another basic principle in the teachings of Jesus, found in the gospels. Jesus said, "If any people want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake will save them." (Mark 8:34-35)

"Deny yourself. Take up your cross. You can win by losing." What did Jesus mean when he issued this invitation to those who want to follow him?

These ideas — denying yourself, taking up your cross, and winning by losing — are contrary to what we are told every day in our present culture. How often do you hear these suggestions in everyday conversation? When was the last time you saw an advertisement or heard a commercial that asked you to deny yourself, put others first, delay personal gratification, put off buying something you wanted until you could afford it and pay cash, or not to buy it at all, even though you had the money, because you didn't need it?

There are those who think that people who deny themselves and delay personal gratification are strange. Here's one of my favorite letters written to Dear Abby:

"Dear Abby: We live in a nice neighborhood. There is not one house on our block worth less than $100,000. Some new neighbors moved in next door, and I understand they paid cash for their home. They seem very nice, but in some ways, they are weird. One of our daughters was playing in their home with one of their children, and our daughter noticed they didn't have a television set. They have only one car, and the father takes the bus to work every day so the mother and children can use the car. They rarely go anywhere except to church. They spend a lot of time doing things together as a family. The wife doesn't have any fancy clothes or jewelry. The children aren't permitted to have any toys involving violence. Could they belong to some strange religious cult? What do you make of them?"

Abby's answer was: "Maybe they like to save their money, have conservative standards, and high moral principles and ideals. They sound like ideal neighbors to me."

"Deny yourself. Take up your cross. You can win by losing." What do these teachings of Jesus mean for us today?

To help answer this, I want to begin by quoting from one of Dr. M. Scott Peck's books.

Since its first publication in 1978, The Road Less Traveled by Dr. Peck has been a bestseller. Those of you who have read that book will remember that the opening sentence is: "Life is

difficult." Peck then goes on to write, "This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we know that life is difficult — once we truly understand and accept it — then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters."

"Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead, they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties, as if life were generally easy, as if life should be easy. They voice their belief, noisily or subtly, that their difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that should not be and that has somehow been especially visited upon them, or else upon their families, their tribe, their class, their nation, their race, or even their species, and not upon others. I know about this moaning because I have done my share."

Dr. Peck goes on to point out that discipline is a basic set of tools we require to deal with life's difficulties and to solve life's problems. Without discipline, we can solve nothing.

What makes life difficult is that the process of confronting and solving problems is a painful one. And since life poses an endless series of problems, life is always difficult and full of both pain and joy.

But here's the good news: it is in the process of meeting and solving problems that life has its meaning. Problems call forth our courage and wisdom; indeed, they create our courage and wisdom. They help us grow mentally and spiritually. Thus, says Peck, wise people learn not to dread but actually to welcome problems. However, there are those who are not so wise, and because we fear the pain involved, we attempt to avoid problems. We procrastinate, hoping they will go away. We ignore them, forget them, and pretend they do not exist. Some even take drugs to assist them in ignoring their problems. We want to avoid them rather than suffer through them.

Some people will go to extraordinary lengths to avoid their problems and the suffering that goes with them. Sometimes they build elaborate fantasies in which to live to the total exclusion of reality. Carl Jung said, "Neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering."

Wise people, however, learn not to dread but to actually welcome problems. That's precisely what Jesus was talking about when he said, "Take up your cross and follow me." Welcome your problems, your obstacles, your sufferings. Take them up and deal with them. When we avoid the legitimate suffering that results from dealing with problems, we also avoid the growth that problems demand of us.

A word of explanation about life's "crosses" is necessary here. Too often, when we talk about taking up our cross, we mean something different from what Jesus meant when he invited us to do so. In times of adversity, we've all heard people say, "I guess this is my cross to bear." One day, I overheard a woman say, "My aging mother is a helpless invalid and very dependent on me. I can't spend much time away from her. This may continue for many 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, everyone has something they could

complain about — that's the nature of human existence. But if their so-called "cross to bear" is involuntary, that is, if it's 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 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 St. Paul uses to describe whatever disability he had to deal with throughout his life. We don't know what his emotional or physical 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.

How, then, do we deal with the "crosses" in life, the problems which constantly confront us and which we voluntarily take up?

Discipline is the basic set of tools we need to solve life's problems. We need discipline to handle life's crosses effectively. When we teach ourselves and our children discipline, we are teaching them and ourselves how to suffer and also how to grow.

In this sermon, what we are calling discipline has two parts: delaying gratification and accepting responsibility.

Let's examine each one. When Jesus said, "Deny yourself," he was talking about delaying gratification. It's not a very popular idea in our time. On the contrary, we are mostly urged to think first of ourselves, to buy now and worry about paying later. We are told over and over again, "You can have it all now."

Why are there more teenage pregnancies in our country than anywhere else in the world? Because we refuse to deny ourselves; we refuse to delay gratification. Putting off sexual relations until we are mature and married is considered old-fashioned. Why wait? Do it now, we are told.

Dr. Peck tells a story about one of his patients, a 30-year-old financial analyst. She was complaining to him about how, over a period of months, she had an increasing tendency to procrastinate in her job. With the help of Dr. Peck, she had worked through a lot of personal problems, yet she continued to procrastinate as much as ever. She was not delaying gratification — just the opposite.

Finally, one day Peck asked her, "Do you like cake?" She replied that she did. "Which part of the cake do you like better, the cake or the frosting?" he asked. "Oh, the frosting," she answered enthusiastically. "And how do you eat a piece of cake?" he asked. "I eat the frosting first, of course," she replied.

From her cake-eating habits, they went on to examine her work habits, and as expected, they discovered that on a given workday, she would devote the first hour to the more gratifying part of her work and the remaining six hours getting around to the objectionable remainder. Peck suggested that if she were to force herself to accomplish the unpleasant part of her job during the first hour, she would then be free to enjoy the other six. "Isn't one hour of pain followed by six of pleasure preferable to one hour of pleasure followed by six of pain?" She agreed, and being a person of strong will, she no longer procrastinates.

Denying yourself, delaying gratification, is a process of scheduling the pain and pleasure of life in such a way as to enhance the pleasure by meeting and experiencing the pain first and getting it over with. It is the only decent way to live.

Denying yourself has another component in addition to delaying gratification. Lest you misunderstand, when Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, he does not mean that we are to treat ourselves as unworthy. He does not mean that we are to put ourselves down as having no value. He does not mean that we are not to love ourselves.

In fact, Jesus saw the self as very important, and its importance is enhanced when it is aware of its connection with others and with God. To activate this connection, we need to consciously choose to commit ourselves to something greater than ourselves. We need to have a higher loyalty than pure selfishness. When we make a commitment and devote our time and energy to a worthy ideal, we are drawn out of ourselves, and we continue to grow spiritually. If we do not commit ourselves to something greater, we shrink and diminish, and life loses its meaning and worth.

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 more. There is the self that whispers, “Satisfy your every desire now. You deserve it.” There is the self that urges us to do our duty, to accept responsibility. We have multiple personalities. To deny yourself and take up your cross means that you are able to rise above your basic self and selfish desires and to connect with others and with God. Your multiple selves are drawn together into one. That’s what Jesus meant when he said, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”

In other words, when you begin to lose your life, give it away, then you win. You win because your self, your life, is stretched, pulled, and enlarged, rather than narrowed, shriveled, and turned inward.

The natural byproduct of this kind of self-denial and the willingness to take up your cross, the willingness to accept and overcome life’s problems and difficulties, of adopting discipline, is a new kind of joy. This kind of cross-bearing is not a sad, grim, unhappy process, but the opposite.

It’s a rewarding process because you are now taking responsibility for your problems, and you cannot solve a problem until you take responsibility for it.

Yet, there are so many people who seek to avoid the pain of their problems, who seek to avoid taking up their cross by saying to themselves, “This problem was caused by other people, or by social circumstances beyond my control, and therefore it is up to other people to solve this problem for me.”

“Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.” Once you begin to practice deferred gratification, accept responsibility for your problems, and deal with them, you are free and no longer a victim. Then you are following Jesus. Amen.