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EASTER DEVOTIONAL

A Path Not for the Faint of Heart

The cost of the cross in a world that loves pleasure

O. ALAN NOBLE/POSTED FEBRUARY 14, 2024

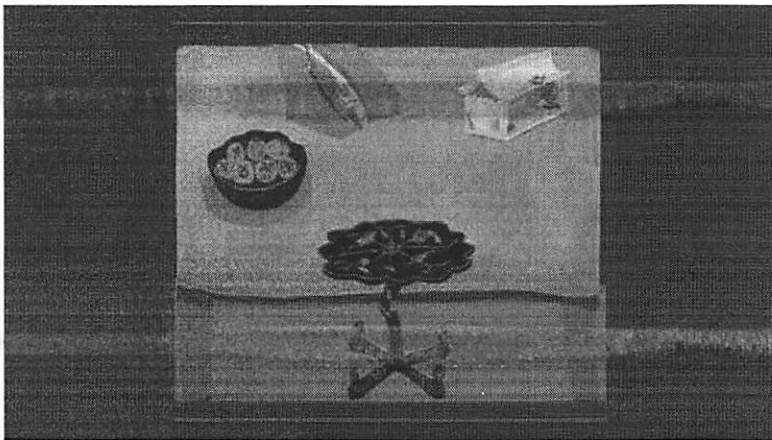


Image: Michelle Chun
Table Assemblage. Oil on Canvas. 60 x 50

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. — Matthew 16:24

In some of the most haunting words in Scripture, Christ tells his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24, ESV). At this point in the Passion story, the disciples don't yet know the power of Christ's words. They certainly understood what a cross was and knew something about the horrors of crucifixion, but they didn't yet know that Christ himself would die on this instrument of Roman torture—or the various forms of suffering they each would face themselves.

At the core of Christianity is the command to deny ourselves. In a culture that revolves around affirming ourselves, it naturally becomes harder and harder to communicate that aspect effectively. The idea that we would deny ourselves as an act of spirituality is now counterintuitive. In Charles Taylor's book *A Secular Age*, he touches on the challenge of self-denial in the modern age: "For many people today, to set aside their own

path in order to conform to some external authority just doesn't seem comprehensible as a form of spiritual life."

Self-denial is not just hard; it feels incomprehensible in our time, an age in which self-fulfillment is the cornerstone of a good life. Yet our faith does not ask us to neglect self-fulfillment—it just redefines the terms. According to the biblical story, we were actually created to deny ourselves, and in denying ourselves, we fulfill our true selves.

The world defines fulfillment as flowing from the authentic heart of the individual, unrestrained by any external sources. Christianity teaches that our hearts are wicked and unreliable— that we desire things that are not just bad, but are bad for us.

Jesus teaches the paradox that self-denial is self-affirmation (Matt. 16:25). It's just that the "self" and the "affirmation" are defined by God, not by our fallible human whims. Who we are (children of God) and what it means for us to be fulfilled (union with Christ) isn't up to us. To be with Christ is to be without our selfish desires.

So we must ask: what does it mean to deny ourselves? It means that we turn from sin. All sin is the act of choosing our own path against God's will for us. It is a perverse affirmation of the self which puts its desires ahead of our neighbor and even God.

Obedience is a cross that we bear; it is a form of suffering, even though it is a suffering that brings healing, peace, and restoration. We like to imagine that obedience to God is painless, except perhaps in the case of persecution. But even when the world isn't punishing us for our faith, simply choosing not to sin involves suffering. In the case of persisting, deeply ingrained sins, repentance requires a tearing away from bad habits; a breaking of familiar rituals; a rending from disobedience. And that can hurt.

For example (we don't recognize this enough) choosing to be faithful in marriage requires that we deny ourselves the pleasure of intimacy with other people. For some people this is easy, but it can be a profound denial for others. After all, the world is filled with beautiful, interesting, lovely people. To say "I do" is to say "I deny." For the sake of this fulfillment, I deny myself the option of being with someone else.

In this season of Lent, we remember that this form of self-denial is a model for the Christian life. While the world reminds us how delightful its pleasures are—how much we "deserve" them, and why honoring our desires is loving ourselves—we instead pledge ourselves to Christ. Greed, pride, envy, lust, gluttony—all sins we find ourselves more than capable of embracing as pleasures, and which following Christ requires us to deny. They are pleasures that harm us, but initially, like bread eaten in secret, they are pleasant (Prov. 9:17).

The Christian path is not for the faint of heart. It demands a great deal of courage, humility, and self-sacrifice. But we have a faithful Savior who modeled this sacrifice for us, who knows the cost of denial and the beauty of faithfulness. And faithfulness is beautiful. The same Christ that suffered on the cross was glorified in his body. And likewise, when we deny ourselves we are glorified to God. We receive a peace that comes only from denying our sinful desires and delighting in God.

Reflection Questions:

1. How does Christianity redefine fulfillment in contrast to the secular view of self-fulfillment?
 2. During the season of Lent, what specific areas of self-denial were highlighted for you in the devotional? How can these areas be applied in our lives during this season?
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*This article is part of *Easter in the Everyday*, a devotional to help individuals, small groups, and families journey through the 2024 Lent & Easter season. Learn more about this special issue [here!](#)*