

"Self-denial... a Contradiction in Terms?"

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Self-Denial? That’s not something we Americans like to do. We’ve come to enjoy our creature comforts. Now it is official that we are in an Economic Crisis! They say things haven’t been this bad since 1981. That economic period was a lot easier for me than this one. I was in Seminary at that time. I had no house with mortgage payments. I had an old beat up car - with no car payments. I wasn’t giving as much in my church in offerings. There was no Pension Fund to worry about. A Mutual Fund was not even a consideration at that time. And a Vacation might have been a day at the shore. You know, it’s a lot easier to “Deny yourself” things before you have many things to give up.

The fact that I do feel this financial crisis more than the last one in the 80's just shows me how much I’ve been blessed in the past 20+ years. I have a home, although be it with a mortgage. I give a regular percentage of my income to the Church, I have a Pension Fund, a Mutual Fund, a more dependable car, and although I don’t get to do it very often, I am able to take a nice vacation every now and then. So this financial crisis hurts more because I have more. Like many of you my little nest egg in the Mutual Fund, where I would go to for emergency funds, has been drastically depleted. As a result, regular savings has been spent for unexpected expenses and vacations. When I look at where I can cut some expenses, believe it or not I did tell some friends that I can’t join them on a trip to Florida. I tend to bring my lunch to the office more regularly. I don’t eat out as often I have discontinued my series subscription to the Philadelphia Orchestra. But I have not cut back on my Church offering. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

The fact that any of us are feeling this financial crisis only goes to show that we have been blessed. We have had financial blessings to BE affected. Now realizing that we have been blessed does not make it any easier to endure the losses. But it can serve as a reminder, that the one who has blessed us will continue to bless us and pull us through. But we are an impatient people. We want it to change now. Not in a year-and-a-half as many are predicting, but we want change NOW! In fact, that was the main theme in this past Presidential Campaign. Change NOW!

It is always interesting to watch a Presidential Campaign. As one candidate is put up against another, they are asked pointed questions, and usually give evasive answers. They have learned from past experience and by watching other Presidential candidates throughout history, that you have to address the immediate issues and not share any of your visions for the future. The American people don't seem to care about the future. They want to know what you will do for them today!

One of the people who taught them this lesson was President Andrew Johnson. He was Vice President when Abraham Lincoln was elected and took over the Presidency after his assassination. Now if Johnson had been politically smart, he would never have attempted to carry out Lincoln's policy of Reconciliation with the states at the end of the Civil War. But Johnson believed in the policy of Reconciliation. He believed that it was in the long-termed best interests of the United States that all the states be reunited. He offered amnesty for those involved in the succession acts and hastened the rejoining of Virginia back into the Union. He fought for reconciliation and in 1868 had to face impeachment proceedings due to the unpopularity of his actions. He came within one vote of being impeached. He wasn't looking at what would help him then. Instead, he was looking at what would help the country now.

Johnson was only following what the Gospel teaches: For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. Andrew Johnson honestly felt that Reconciliation was vital if the nation was to survive, just as reconciliation between us and God is vital if we want to survive the power of death.

As I mentioned earlier, the Presidential candidates had to tell the American people what they could expect from them immediately! That is how they can get elected. If Andrew Johnson wanted to become a popular President, he would not have pushed Lincoln's unpopular policy of reconciliation. But his hope was for the future. He denied himself the comforts of a popular presidency in order to follow his hopes for the future. That's what the Christian is required to do: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Because "Self-Denial" has become so unpopular, we have begun the process of making a very important part of Christianity extinct! As Paul points out to the Romans, the Christian goes through the process of suffering, to endurance, to character and then to hope. If we succeed in eliminating hope from our lives, we are going to have to face fear without it. Part of what is bringing about fear in today's world is the economic situation we find ourselves in. There's a story that may help us put this in a better perspective.

Native hunters in the jungles of Africa have a clever way of trapping monkeys. They slice a coconut in two, hollow it out, and in one half of the shell cut a hole just big enough for a monkey's hand to pass through. Then they place an orange in the other coconut half before fastening together the two halves of the coconut shell back together. Finally, they secure the coconut to a tree with a rope, retreat into the jungle, and wait. Sooner or later, an unsuspecting monkey swings by, smells the delicious orange, and discovers its location inside the coconut. The monkey then slips his hand through the small hole, grasps the orange, and tries to pull it through the hole. Of course, the orange won't come out; it's too big for the hole. To no avail the persistent monkey continues to pull and pull, never realizing the danger he is in.

While the monkey struggles with the orange, the hunters simply stroll in and capture the monkey by throwing a net over him. As long as the monkey keeps his fist wrapped around the orange, the monkey is trapped. It's too bad. The poor monkey could save its life if it would only let go of the orange. It rarely occurs to a monkey, however, that it can't have both the orange and its freedom. That delicious orange becomes a deadly trap.

The world sets traps for us that are not unlike the monkey trap. We hear constantly that if we just have enough money, enough stuff, enough power, enough prestige, then we'll be happy. Under that illusion people spend their whole lives trying to pull the orange out of the coconut. Don't fall for it. Don't be trapped by thinking you must have it all. What the world offers as success - appears delicious, but it eventually robs us of our freedom, our happiness, even at times -our lives.

Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matthew 6:19-20). Jesus also said in Today's Gospel Lesson:, "What will it profit them to gain the whole world, and forfeit their life?" (Mark 8:36). "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

In THESE times more than most, we may be called upon to Deny Ourselves in order to do what God wants done. And sometimes a little suffering comes along with that. But Paul writes: We can rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because god's love has been poured into our hearts. Hope is something that applies to the future.

Yet we want things now. We hesitate investing in the future because there is always the risk that we won't be here in the future and someone else might benefit from our investments. Why don't more Christians have hope?! Without hope there is no character, without character you lose endurance, and we don't have endurance because we refuse to suffer. I don't think we should look for ways to suffer. But many modern day Christians don't even want to struggle. Christians are becoming "soft"!

I still remember a hospital visit to a parishioner. He was reminiscing about the "Old Time Preachers." He said: "Pastor's nowadays don't yell enough anymore. They let people get away with too much!" I have been thinking about that visit. Our giving is already behind budget - and we haven't been able to cover the last 2 mortgage payments without borrowing from other funds. It must be because I don't yell about money. Our attendance has not been as good as it could be. That's probably because I try to be understanding when people tell me that they would have been to worship but it's the only morning they can sleep late, or the kids had a Hockey game, or they were working on a home improvement project, or any of the many other excuses I hear. "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross

and follow me."

Self-denial? In today's world? It's a contradiction in terms. Give up that morning in bed, the morning on the golf course, that breakfast at the restaurant? "Pastors nowadays don't yell enough anymore." Don't get me started! I'm afraid that if I start yelling I may not stop. I really don't know if I'm brave enough to yell. Andrew Johnson yelled about following through with Lincoln's Reconciliation project and almost got himself impeached. Sometimes I'm afraid that if I start yelling about some of the things that should get yelled about, I'm going to be facing a lot of grief. I don't want to yell about these things. People who yell aren't popular or well liked. I like people to like me. But then again, President Andrew Johnson wasn't too popular, but he got the job done. Jesus wasn't as popular as the criminal named Barabas when it came time to release someone from crucifixion. But he got the job done. Maybe it's time that Pastor's do yell like they did in the "Olden Days".

We have been Baptized into the family of God. Baptism gives a person hope for the future. It says that no matter what happens from this point on, you can be assured that you will be able to endure the suffering and have hope in tomorrow.

Our Congregation has been here for 257 years. I can't help but wonder what hopes the congregation of 1752 had for those who would follow them? If it were not for their Self-Denial, would we have the building we worship in? Would we have the Heritage we enjoy? Would there even be a Lutheran congregation in Lafayette Hill? "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Maybe it is time that Pastor's start yelling again, causing parishioners to suffer a bit more. Knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. Our congregation needs hope. Each one of us needs hope. If suffering produces hope, perhaps a bit of Self-Denial and suffering will be worth it. Just keep in mind that if Christ had not been willing to suffer and deny himself, none of us would have any Hope.  
Amen!