

OPENING:

When Jesus says these words to Peter,

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me...” he means it.

These are difficult words about suffering, denial, and the cost of discipleship. Ones that we should take seriously.

But I would still forgive if you were to say: “Charles, it’s Labor Day weekend and here I am in church, listening to this sermon, I am *already* denying myself.”

Our culture in the United States has such an interesting relationship with work and with rest.

I want to talk about that this morning and try to hear what Jesus is saying to Peter, to listen to our Lord and Saviour,

the one who said those words

but also the one who partied with publicans and prostitutes,

who cavorted on the Sabbath,

and still also the one who meant it, when he said he was headed to his death by turning his face to Jerusalem and picking up a wooden cross.

STOICISM:

As Americans, where does this this focus, this almost religious devotion, to hard work come from?

I love that line: “Americans live to work, while Europeans work to live.”

What animates that?

Apparently, the most read book in American homes in the 19th century, besides the Bible, was Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*.¹

This book is a classic of Roman philosophy, of Stoicism, a word that we all understand to mean something about self-denial and bearing life’s travails without complaint.

Or, maybe we get it from the Puritans, or maybe it’s the much vaunted “Protestant work ethic” or it’s a part of the mythical American Dream.

¹ Wyatt-Brown, Bertram. 2007. *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*. (25th Anniversary Ed., Originally Published 1982) New York: Oxford University Press, xvi.

From these, and although the line is not drawn straight, you have Gary Cooper in *High Noon* and all the John Wayne Western classics, featuring heroes that were stolid, reserved, stoical, hard-working, capable, but some might say repressed. The strong silent types, the rocks, the dependable ones.

In the church, the self-denying appear in different ways: as the members who come EVERY Sunday, the volunteers that never miss an opportunity to give, the clergy who don't know what to do on vacation, all resulting in the constant entreaties from yours truly:

“Join the altar guild”...

“teach Sunday School”...

“volunteer for Coffee Hour”...

“GIVE of your time, talent, and treasure.”

So many opportunities to serve here at St. Timothy's and at any church anywhere. So many ways, large and small, “to take up your cross.”

The church runs off that energy, by the way, and I thank God for it.

GOSPEL:

So, back to our passage: this story appears in all 3 Gospels, and it is among Jesus' most famous of pronouncements.

From my sketch above, I think that in some ways the world has taken in Jesus' call to discipleship, his rebuke of Peter, and specifically this notion of self-denial.

But maybe in the wrong proportions.

From my personal experience, I remember a conversation that I had with a therapist once and it was about my self-conception as a “rock” to myself and to my family and to the world around me.

I had explained to her that “Rocks, you see, are tough. They can weather things. They are dependable, they don't let you down, they persevere.”

My therapist offered that: “Yes, that's true. but rocks don't move, rock don't change. Rocks don't feel. Rocks are rock.”

I thought about that exchange when Jesus called Peter a rock last week, changing his name in fact, saying: “it's upon you ‘Rocky’ that I will build my church.”

Then, in a head-snapping move, Jesus calls Peter “a rock” again this week, but this time, it's not a compliment, Jesus says “you are a ‘stumbling block’—you are in my way, you dull piece of stone.” The rebuke is severe with Satan being invoked and all the sudden Peter has been demoted from the vaunted keeper of the iron keys to an impediment blocking the path that Jesus has in front of him.

If we see Peter as a proxy for the church, and thus for us, it helps us realize that we should never get too comfortable in our assumptions. Never too dogmatic or rigid in our self-understanding. Somehow we need to be BOTH steady and faithful, BUT ALSO fluid and changing. Committed to the effort but never so presumptuous to think that we have it all figured out.

SELF-DENIAL:

Regardless, it's complicated: this balance between self-denial and pleasure, of work and rest, of following a God who put himself on the cross, but also realizing that Jesus did that for us so we would not have to.

All too often, I think, the ones who are asked to deny themselves are the ones who have the least, those who are marginalized, economically or socially. They are those on the fringes who, for whatever reason, have been denied things all their lives to the point that it's culturally expected.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton had this to say on the subject: "*Men* think of *self-sacrifice* is the most charming of cardinal virtues for women... and in order to keep it in healthy working order they make opportunities for its illustration as often as possible."²

I worry that's particularly true in the church, and I sometimes worry about my own complicity in it.

You can flip it too, though—again thinking it from a gendered perspective. I remember when I was a teacher a book came out called “Masterminds and Wingmen: Helping our Boys Cope with Schoolyard Power, Locker-Room Tests, Girlfriends, and the New Rules of the Boy World”³ and it talked about the images that our young boys see in our media that all are masked: Batman, Spiderman, Darth Vader, etc. They are all muscular, inscrutable, powerful, stoical, self-denying and violent.

Why do we hold that up so much as a cultural value?

Somehow, we hear Jesus' words: “deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me” and we hear “deny yourself emotion”

² Daly, Lois K. 1994. *Feminist Theological Ethics: a Reader*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press. 151. Quoted in Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. 1985. *The Woman's Bible. I*: 184.

³ Wiseman Rosalind. 2013. *Masterminds & Wingmen: Helping Our Boys Cope with Schoolyard Power Locker-Room Tests Girlfriends and the New Rules of Boy World*. New York: Harmony Books.

“deny others their right of self-expression or self-conception.”
Somehow implying that we should seek out suffering for its own sake.
As if life is not full of it already.

My only pastoral wisdom and offering in how to square this balance is what we read in our prayer book at the end of every service:

“we humbly beseech thee, O heavenly Father, so to assist us with thy grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all such **good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in**”⁴

CONCLUSION

A couple stories to close.

This weekend of all weekends, the patron saint of relaxation and a good time, Jimmy Buffett, died. The musician spent decades preaching this message of vacation from life’s worries and reminding us to enjoy life to its fullest. I have never been a huge fan of his music but I have been struck by people’s reminiscences of the artist on social media. Perhaps Jimmy Buffett has always been a healthy corrective to a society immersed in the culture of work. ⁵

One more story to close on that note, a local pastor, Howard-John Wesley, of Alfred Street Baptist Church—insanely gifted preacher of one of the most prominent African-American churches in the country. The Obamas went there for Easter, 15k/week on livestream.⁶

In December 2019, Howard-John Wesley shocked his congregation in by announcing a sabbatical, he was only 47. He talked about his health, and his relationship, and his disconnect with God.

In the Washington Post article about this, the pastor listed some advice that he should have heeded. He said:

“When I started, I was working seven days a week.

A member of the church at the time — an older lady — said,

‘Why do you work every day?’ " he recalled."

I said, ‘The devil doesn’t take a day off.’

She said, ‘Why is the devil your role model?’”⁷

AMEN

⁴ BCP, 339

⁵ [Jimmy Buffett’s hangover hit ‘Margaritaville’ made him a mogul \(washingtonpost.com\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/jimmy-buffett-s-hangover-hit-margaritaville-made-him-a-mogul/2019/12/11/)

⁶ [Alfred Street Baptist Church - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUGnx3nNNr4)

⁷ https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/12/11/i-feel-so-distant-god-popular-dc-area-pastor-confesses-hes-tired-announces-sabbatical/?fbclid=IwAR3ouxGr1-6evMNVQ1-OsrFpDUX-gGJrWsEdJdEqEWUxDZmY8pORjk_0Mfs#comments-wrapper;
<https://youtu.be/IUGnx3nNNr4?t=1305>