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UNSTUCK: FROM 'SELF' LIMITATION Michael B. Beough
Mark 8:31-38; Galatians 2:20 March 8, 2009
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Have you ever been stuck on yourself? I think this is one of the most important realities we need to come to grips with. And one of the most difficult to address.

We may not be as bad as Teddy Roosevelt. One of his children once said, "Father always wanted to be the bride at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral."

All of us probably know or have known someone who is insufferably self-centered. They act as though the world revolves around them. They come across like the boy on his first date with a new girlfriend. After talking non-stop about himself, he finally turns to the girl and says, "Enough about me. Tell me something about yourself. *What do you like about me?*"

In our prayer of confession this morning, we called this self-centeredness the sticky goo that makes us useless in God's kingdom on earth. It keeps the windows of heaven stuck shut. Not a good way to make friends or influence enemies.

I must confess that self-centeredness remains one of the biggest obstacles in my life. Only I would call it self-consciousness. I try not to be insufferable in regard to myself, but I can never escape my concern for myself, my desire to please myself, my overriding will to protect myself. So many of my decisions about what I do or don't do, say or don't say, arise from this self-regard. It's all about me.

In other words, I can fully understand where Peter is coming from in Mark 8:31-38.

These verses represent the turning point in the Gospel of Mark. They almost precisely divide Mark into equal halves. For the first time, Jesus tells his disciples that he must suffer and die and be raised again. Jesus wants them to know what is in store for them.

Up to this point, Peter has had the time of his life with Jesus, but the prospect of suffering rattles Peter's cage. He never dreamed that suffering would be a part of Jesus' kingdom plan. Suddenly, Peter is no longer the go-it-along guy. He rebukes Jesus, a strong word used by exorcists to cast out demons. Peter thinks a demon has gotten hold of Jesus. He had not signed up for a life of suffering.

I can completely identify with Peter. In our pain-killer age, we do everything we can to avoid suffering. Then we read the words of Jesus who

invites us to suffer with him and he sounds a bit crazy. Aren't we trying to avoid suffering? Isn't it God's job to keep us from suffering?

However, look at what Jesus says to Peter. Jesus turns and rebukes Peter. Says Peter is the one with the demon, and not just any demon, but the granddaddy of all demons, Satan. "Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Absolutely correct! **When we think with the minds of men, what Jesus proposes sounds crazy.**

Jesus then draws a line in the sand in verse 34. *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."* In this one sentence, Jesus describes his mission. He came to liberate us from the self as the only controlling interest in our lives. He places before us a clear alternative to the self-first life we all live. Why? Because "whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it."

Jesus knows that as long as self calls the shots, we will live a limited kind of life. We will hesitate to do the things God calls us to do. We will fail to go where God sends us. We will miss out on the greatest blessings God has in store for us. So he calls us to a life of self-denial.

Let's think a moment about the self-denial Jesus speaks of. First, what it does not mean.

It does not mean denying myself the things I really like, like giving up chocolate for Lent. Maybe you have heard that in Italy the Pope suggested that everyone give up their electronic gadgets every Friday through Lent. No text messaging, no internet searching, no video games, etc. That might not be a bad idea, but I hardly think Jesus will be impressed.

It does not mean taking a low opinion of myself, or never thinking about myself. That kind of self-denial fosters unhealthy mental health. Some of our biggest problems erupt when we fail to recognize and celebrate the self God has given us. We can be most dangerous when we least love ourselves. Even Jesus said we are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Our entertainer at the Upward Award Ceremonies last Sunday referred to this self-love as the fun of being in third place. In Matthew 22, Jesus commands us to love God, love neighbor, and then love self.

It does not mean going to live in a monastery. When I think of self-denial, I almost always picture monks like at Christ in the Desert monastery in New Mexico. They live out in the middle of nowhere wearing simple robes and praying five or ten times daily. Every time they go to the beautiful little chapel for prayer, they walk past a hole in the ground that is supposed to remind them of their mortality. Maybe God does call some to a life of austerity and self-denial in that sense, but what about you and me? God

gives us families and responsibilities and relationships for the good of the world. Self-denial cannot mean chucking it all and going monastic.

Self-denial does not focus on what I must give up. That's a dead-end if you begin there, like New Year's resolutions. Easy come, easy go.

Still, Jesus came to liberate us from the control that self has over us. How do we in our fast-paced, tech-oriented, instant gratification world do what Jesus says we must do if we are to have life?

Self-denial describes what happens when our hearts are so captured by Christ that we allow him to determine every movement of our days.

Here is the truth: Jesus believed that his death for the sins of the world would capture our hearts. He once said that his cross would be like a magnet, drawing all people to himself. There at the cross, his death would be like a paint scraper scraping away the sticky goo that keeps our lives shut up. His death would dissolve the self-absorption, the self-centeredness, the self-worship until the windows come open and the grace of God blows through with the gift of life as we can know it in no other way.

We would be so smitten with his sacrificial love that we would follow him anywhere. We would see his resurrection from the dead and learn to live without fear and in anticipation of his glory. We would rise with shouts of hallelujah and go into the world proclaiming his name. We would go into the suffering world to make a difference, to help lift the suffering of others, not because community service is required by the school, but because our hearts belong to Christ. Even if it means our own suffering, our own deprivation.

In Galatians 2:20, the Apostle Paul describes a self that has given way to Christ. *"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."*

Paul expresses the outcome of the power of the cross to dislodge from us this preoccupation with self. This does not mean a carelessness that gets us on a Harley to jump over the Snake River. It means a well-intentioned life that follows Jesus wherever he leads: to share the love of God; to care for the sick; to stand with the poor; to seek God's justice; to go into the heart of suffering and pain, on purpose, to be a beacon of hope in a lost and dying world.

The question today is not whether or not we do good deeds for others. The question is whether or not we have been so drawn to the cross that we are crucified there with Christ. So that the life we live is his. So that no matter where he sends us, we are ready to go, and no matter

what he sends us to do, we will do it, no matter the cost, no matter the cross.

“See if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.” – Malachi 3:10b