

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - October 20, 2019 - Selfless Romans 12:1-5 and Philippians 2:4-11

Genesis tells the story of a privileged man named Adam who is created in the image and likeness of God. The man's position is enhanced further when God provides the Garden of Eden as his dwelling place. Yet, though he is highly favored by God, Adam is not freed from divine conditions. Instead, he is instructed not to eat from the tree of knowledge, for to do so would make him like God.¹ Adam is tempted. Wanting to know all things and to share fully in God's wisdom, our spiritual ancestor takes and eats. And in short order, Adam's act of disobedience signals the beginning of paradise lost.

All of this was in the beginning. And I invite you now to fast forward with me through the Old Testament, the gospels, and Acts until we arrive at the letters of Paul. Here, in Philippians, Jesus is portrayed as the new Adam, the central figure in a great, biblical reversal. Contrasts abound. While Adam appeared in the likeness of God, Jesus appears in "human likeness." While Adam sought to grasp more than he received, Jesus "adopts the form of a slave (with all the dishonor and lack of privileges that implies)."² While Adam knowingly disobeyed God's commands,

¹ Morna D. Hooker, *Philippians, The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume XI*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 2000), 508-509.

² Hooker, 509.

Jesus is obedient to the point of death on a cross. The new Adam bears little resemblance to the first.

We learn that Jesus, present and visible in human form is also, mysteriously, one with God. He is privileged in both heaven and on earth, yet he does not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. Instead, he gives freely of himself. He lays down his life. And in doing so, he models a narrative of new possibilities. For “what Adam desired, Christ was intent to forego.”³

This week, I was reminded that parenting is the closest example that I have for what selflessness looks like. On Friday, when I came home from the church, my wife and children were upstairs working on a project in the attic. On the kitchen counter, I spotted several mangoes and a pomegranate. I love mangoes, so I cut one of them and ate part of it. But, I left most of it on the plate because my youngest son, Nathan, is always asking for them.

Next, I sliced the pomegranate. I love those, too. But, Nathan loves them even more. I began extracting the seeds. Did you know that the typical pomegranate has 613 of them? In an age of convenience foods, offering these seeds is a labor of love.

³ Hooker, 508.

You really have to work for it. I took a couple of handfuls for myself, but I placed most of them in Nathan's bowl.

I set the fruit aside, heated some pasta and enjoyed the first couple of bites when my oldest son, Liam, came downstairs and greeted me warmly. His eyes quickly fixed on the pasta. "That looks good," he said, "Can I have some?" I gave him a hug, told him that I loved him, handed him my plate, and headed back to the kitchen for more.

Then, just as I filled my plate for a second time and was ready to join Liam, my youngest son ventured into the kitchen. His eyes were big and bright, admiring the fruit. He asked nicely, but I told him that would have to wait. Incensed by the great injustice of eating something other than sugar, he threw himself on the floor and began screaming. A few minutes later, he regained his composure, admitted that the pasta looked good, too, and promptly wandered off with my second plate of food.

Earlier in life, I remember thinking that I was a pretty selfless person. But then I had children and was reminded daily of how self-focused I really am. Today, I reflect on that moment in Jesus' ministry when he said, "If any want to become my

followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Because this is the foundation of Jesus’ countercultural call to live selflessly. This is the claim on our lives that is a direct challenge to our usual, anxious way of being in the world.

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Friends, Jesus knew about “being pressed and harried and worried.” He recognized that all of this anxiety “leads to a stance of defensiveness and fear and a determination to keep what we have.” Consumed by a constant state of stress, we convince ourselves that “we best get what we can and keep what we have.” But, it eventually “snowballs on us. We get caught up in it and we don’t know what’s happening.”⁵

This is what Jesus was pushing back against. And he did so, in typical fashion, with a question. It’s a question that “doesn’t require an answer because it’s so obvious. It... just stops all our protests and explanations short. You know it well: Which of you, by being anxious, has ever added an inch to your lives?”⁶ The call here is to an alternative way of life. A new way of being in the world that draws

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *A Way Other Than Our Own: Devotions for Lent*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 6.

⁵ Brueggemann, 6.

⁶ Brueggemann, 6.

one's attention away from the self just long enough for us to affirm that our life is both "safely and well held by God."⁷

As Walter Brueggemann reminds us, our faithful God "loves us more than we love ourselves" and, in generosity, frees us "of the anxieties and needs and hungers of... a mistaken, inadequate sense of self."⁸ In the end, "the central event in the drama of salvation is an act of humble service."⁹ Yes. "The self who is denied is the self who is received from God and given back to God in obedience and praise."¹⁰

But, if we know what self-denial is, we also know what self-denial is not. It's not about wallowing in "self-hate." It's not about feeling "bad about yourself" or pondering "your failure and your guilt." And it's certainly not about rejecting "your worth."¹¹ Instead, it's about recognizing that "Christ acted on our behalf without view of gain." And this, in turn, is exactly what God has "exalted and vindicated: self-denying service for others to the point of death with no claim of return, no eye upon reward."¹²

⁷ Brueggemann, 29.

⁸ Brueggemann, 29.

⁹ Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 42.

¹⁰ Brueggemann, 29.

¹¹ Brueggemann, 28.

¹² Craddock, 42.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once wrote that “every [person] must decide whether to walk in the light of creative altruism or the darkness of selfishness. This is the judgement. Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, what are you doing for others.”

Walking in the light of faith, we all know people who are authentically selfless. They have a peaceful, humble spirit. They are not interested in competing with others, but in working collaboratively with them. They are generous with their time, with their talents, and with their financial resources. Selfless people lead not by mandate but by example. They have, we would say, “the mind of Christ.” They “are conformed to what Christ is, and so become what they were meant to be.”¹³

We give thanks for the new Adam, and ask for God’s guidance in our becoming. In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

¹³ Hooker, 504.