

Lenten Sermon Series: (Re)Discovering Jesus: Rebel, Revolutionary, Radical
Sermon Title: "The Radical Jesus"
Leviticus 16:29-31, 34; Psalm 119:33-41; Mark 8:27-38; Philippians 3:7-14
Salem United Methodist Church
March 13, 2016
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We are in the liturgical season of Lent, traditionally the time for self-reflection, denial, and confession. This Lent we are examining our relationship with Jesus Christ so we can have a deeper understanding of the Crucifixion and Resurrection as we head into Easter morning. The Lenten sermon series is highlighting Jesus as a radical, a rebel, and one who started a revolution that has lasted over two thousand years.

A person went to the doctor to get the annual physical. After the examination and tests results were back, the doctor reported the findings to the patient, "Your cholesterol, weight, and self-importance are all too high." Many of us may have dealt with or will have to deal with one or all as being too high in our lifetime. We know there are ways to bring them down. A doctor can prescribe medicine for high cholesterol. A nutritionist can offer meal plans and a physical trainer can assist with exercising to lose weight. But do we deal with a self-importance that is too high?

We would never think of ourselves as being self-important or having inflated egos. That kind of thing is just for politicians, right? As Christians we have a means to bring down the self-importance level in our lives with spiritual disciplines. These fill our soul. If we think of our soul as a box, these are some of the things that fill our soul. For instance, we strive to spend time in prayer, reading devotional materials, reading the Scriptures, or perhaps journaling what God is saying to us. We attend worship regularly to feed our souls and to remember who is the most important in our lives, and it is not us. Worship reminds us to put God first and we are reminded of the importance of being in relationship with each other. We take communion regularly as a means to feed our soul with God's love and forgiveness. We may attend a small group in which we talk about what God is doing in our lives and as a means to support one another in our spiritual journey as well as hold one another accountable. Or we may attend a Bible study to assist us with reading and understanding the Bible and how God's word applies to our lives today. As we fill the soul box with these practices, we come to realize that everything is a gift of God: our time, our money, our education. How we spend our time, how we spend our money and what we do with our education all reflect the state of our soul. We may feel a call on our lives to a career that will serve God's people in some way. So we go to school to get degrees and certifications. We come to an understanding that we are to serve others so we set out to do whatever we can to help those in need. We fill our soul box so we can be drawn close to God and do God's will in our lives. So we can do good and not harm others with our words and deeds. Think of the soul box as things that makes God smile. These same things should make us smile as well.

But what happens when we neglect the soul box. It becomes empty and the ego box or the self-importance box begins to fill up. Everything becomes about the ego or "I, me, my, mine, my, myself." It begins with "I am not enough. This is not enough. I do not have enough." I do not have enough time. I have to do this or that or I have to do everything." Our time is spent trying to make everyone else happy, meeting the expectations of others. And money becomes "my money." "I have to climb the ladder of success to make more money because I want to spend my money on what makes me happy. I want to entertain me." So we buy more than we need. We spend extravagantly. We spend as much as it takes to raise our status among our peers. And the degree we obtain becomes something we can hide behind or something that we can use to raise our status with an air of arrogance. Even our faith can become about "me," too. "The way I believe is the only way

to believe. My way of believing is the right way to believe. Yours is wrong.” We can use the Bible as a weapon rather than a means of God’s grace. “The Bible says...” And when it comes to other people, we harm them out of spite, revenge, and lack of concern. We use them to serve our own purposes or to make us great. We scheme about ways we can use people or step on them so we can climb higher. We can spend our whole life climbing the ladder only to discover that when we get to the top, the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall. We get caught up in our own lives, needs, and ego gratification. An inflated ego is a hollow person who hungers, who is never satisfied, and never really happy. A person that thinks more of his/herself does not make God happy either. There is no magic pill or diet for an inflated ego or high self-importance.

But there is a cure—a God created cure: surrender. When we think of surrender, we think of a criminal handing themselves over to the police. Or we think of the losing side in a battle waving the white flag and conceding defeat. When we talk about spiritual surrender, we are talking about handing ourselves over to God. We are talking about waving the white flag and admitting defeat. We are saying, “I can’t do this on my own anymore. I need you, Jesus.” Surrender is letting go of the ego. It’s consciously realizing that the ego is self-defeating. It’s a deep understanding that my way is not the way of Jesus. And handing over every aspect of our lives to Jesus: our time, our money, our careers, our faith development, our families, our church, our service, our worship. Every aspect of our lives is given to Jesus. We let go of our egos so we can make room for Jesus to grow in us and among us. Surrender is getting our self out of the way so Jesus can move in. Surrender is about sacrificing self-interest. Surrender is about denying our very self. We give our self to Jesus, every aspect. Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” To be saved we have to deny ourselves? To gain we have to lose? What kind of radical talk is this? Who is this Jesus who talks about denying self and taking up crosses as some kind of self-sacrifice? And why would anyone want to live this radical way of life?

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, offers us an answer. “Surrender and letting go sounds like losing. But it’s actually accessing a deeper, broader sense of the self, which is already whole, already content, already filled with abundant life. This is the part of you that has always loved God and said “Yes” to God. It’s the part of you that is Love, and all we have to do is let go and fall into it. It’s already there. Once you move your identity to that level of deep inner contentment and compassion, you realize that you’re drawing upon a Life that is larger than your own, and from a deeper Abundance. Once you learn to do that, why would you ever again settle for some scarcity model, [a not enough model] for life?” This is radical thinking from the rest of the way the world thinks. This is a radical way of living: an extreme way of being.

Surrendering, letting go, denying self, taking up your cross and following Jesus is a process. Sometimes it is one step at a time. Other times we take what we have surrendered back and continue to focus on self. This is why it is sooo important to make sure we fill our soul and not allow it to empty. It is through these spiritual disciplines that we can come to a deeper understanding of what cross we are to carry, a deeper understanding of what God is calling us to carry for others, a deeper understanding of what we are to give so we can serve and not just volunteer. We are called to deny ourselves so we can serve from God’s heart. We are called to gain Christ, to receive more of Christ so we can become radical masterpieces in this world for God. Reflection Questions: From what box are you living? What is one thing that you can surrender, hand over to God? What cross are you being called to carry? What is God telling you to do with your time, your money, your life? Are you living a radical life?

Resources: *The Renegade Gospel* by Mike Slaughter; “The Soul of Leadership,” talk given at Leadership Days by Rev. Dr. Matt Poole; *The Art of Letting Go* by Richard Rohr, OFM

