

# Self-Denial or Self-Affirmation? Freedom or Slavery? A Lenten Sermon

I preached this sermon a few years ago, and it was on my old website. With Lent upon us, I thought people might find it helpful again.



Lent is a time of the Church year that is dedicated to repentance, to dying to self. During these six weeks, we enter a period of self-examination, of humility, of repentance, of “acknowledg[ing] and bewail[ing] our manifold sins and wickedness.” Rather than affirming our choices, Lent seems to be about denying our choices. You do not have to be a genius to realize that this message of self-denial is out of touch with the values of our society. The message of the beer commercials and of most of the television shows on my television set is not one of self-denial, but of self-affirmation. The “swimsuit” edition of *Sports Illustrated*, which I did not notice in the grocery aisle last week, was not telling me to hold back. Even within the Christian churches, the message of self-affirmation has (broadly speaking) replaced the message of self-denial. More than ten years after Jim Baker and Jimmy Swaggart, there are still some TV evangelists who preach that God wants you to be rich or healthy or successful. If you’re not, it must be because you

don't have enough faith. On a less crass level, there are theologians, bishops and pastors within the Episcopal Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the mainline Protestant churches who affirm that the self should be valued, not denied.

At any rate, self-denial is a message that doesn't preach well in contemporary society. But perhaps we'll come to a better understanding of what Christian tradition means by self-denial if we examine the problem of the self from a different angle. While self-denial does not speak to contemporary culture, the apostle Paul sets up a contrast in this morning's epistle reading that is very much in tune with our contemporary concerns: the contrast between freedom and bondage.

If there is a single value that lies at the heart of contemporary American culture, it is freedom. After the horror of September 11, we were told that what was under attack was our American love of liberty. Yet our society is conflicted about what freedom means. In current political controversy, opponents always present themselves as defending the values of freedom. In the abortion debate, one side presents itself as defending a woman's right to choose—freedom! On the other side of the political spectrum, the National Rifle Association presents itself as preserving the “right to bear arms”—freedom! Defenders of unrestrained capitalism talk about “free markets.” Those who represent the opposite side of the economic spectrum talk about “liberation” and “freedom from economic exploitation.” The Libertarian political party speaks of freedom from *all* government intervention or restraint, whether in the Market Place or the bedroom or perhaps sharing a little hashish among friends.

These various disagreements reflect just how confused and conflicted our society is about this very notion of freedom. For another common theme in contemporary society is the problem of addiction, and the corresponding need to *restrain*

freedom. Since the nineteen seventies, a common cultural symbol is the Rehabilitation Center. It seems almost impossible to attain real celebrity status unless one has dried out at the Betty Ford Center at least once. The actor Robert Downey Jr. and the baseball player Daryl Strawberry go back over and over. In a recently popular movie, Sandra Bullock plays an alcoholic who is so out of control, she ruins her own sister's wedding by showing up drunk. The title of the movie, *Twenty-Eight Days*, refers to the number of days it takes to get sober in such a clinic. And exactly what happens at the clinic? Bullock's freedoms are denied. She cannot have alcohol or drugs. She is not free to come and go when she wants. She has to live by a strict schedule, more Spartan than a Benedictine monastery.

Our culture's confusion and conflictedness about freedom lies in the fact that we have turned freedom, the "right to choose," into a value in itself. Yet there is no such thing as freedom to choose—simple and of itself. Freedom is always the ability to choose *something*. If you were, without explanation, to command me to—"Choose!" "Make your choice now!"—I could only respond with, "Choose what?" To choose is to choose one thing rather than another. On the old television program, *Let's Make a Deal!*, Monty Hall's contestants had to choose between Door No. 1, Door No. 2, and Door No. 3. There is no freedom without an object of choice.

Whether freedom is a good thing or a bad thing depends wholly on the worthwhileness of the thing one chooses. Monty Hall's contestants wanted to choose the door behind which was hidden the Hawaiian vacation, not the goat eating the bail of hay. The Medieval theologians understood there was no freedom without objects. They said that freedom was rooted not simply in choice, but in Love. One chose something because one was attracted to it as an object of love, because one loved it. Some things are worthy of our love, and some are not. So the question of whether freedom is a good thing lies in the nature

of what it is one loves. The “right to sexual expression” or the “right to bear arms” or “free markets” are good things only if the objects we choose to love when we embrace these political slogans are inherently worth loving. The paradoxical nature of freedom is that some of the things we choose to love are not worth loving, and to exercise our freedom to love them leads us not into freedom, but into a kind of slavery, as we over and over love the kinds of things that are not very good for us, or for those around us. So the alcoholic or the drug addict chooses to love something that will in the end destroy him or her and destroy his or her relationships to others and to things that he or she should prefer to love.

This is the point that the apostle Paul expresses in today’s epistle: “Do you not know,” says Paul, “that if you yield yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are the slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?” For Paul, there is no such thing as freedom as such. One is a slave to whatever one loves. If one loves sin, then one is a slave to sin. If one loves God, then one becomes a “slave of righteousness.” Having been set free from sin, says Paul, we have become slaves of righteousness.

It is this notion that freedom is determined by the objects we love, whether sin or righteousness, and that we become slaves of that which we embrace in love, that helps us to understand what the Christian tradition means by self-denial, and under what circumstances self-denial might be a good thing. I think we have to admit that some in the Christian tradition have not got it right. It is a false understanding of self-denial which assumes that God wishes to destroy our self simply as self. On this mistaken view, to esteem yourself to be nothing, to suffer pointlessly, to do without the things you need, to be a doormat, these things are good for you, and God will like you better because you do them. The *Rule of St. Benedict*, for example, says that “we are forbidden to do our own will” and

“humility is attained when a man not only confesses that he is an inferior and common wretch but believes it in the depths of his heart.” Thomas A Kempis says in *The Imitation of Christ* that “a man who truly knows himself realizes his own worthlessness, and takes no pleasure in the praises of others.” I cannot believe that this kind of spirituality is terribly healthy.

Over against this mistaken view, I think it must be affirmed first that the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ is not an egotist. God has not created us because he needs miserable sinners to grovel before him. God does not need our praises to feed his ego as if he were an insecure and self-obsessed cosmic bureaucrat who wants constantly to be reassured that he is the best and the wisest in his field. God is not petty. He does not need for us to suffer so that he can feel better.

I think the meaning of self-denial can better be understood in light of what the Medievals said about the connection between freedom and love. Both scripture and the Christian tradition tell us that from eternity, God is love. The “Love which,” in Dante’s words, “moves the sun and the stars,” has neither need nor desire to destroy our small selves to exalt his own. The blessed Trinity simply is God sharing the love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit forever. This triune love created us in his image and likeness so that this love might overflow and be shared with someone besides himself. The divine goal for creation is that we might be united to our Creator and in this way share in this love which he is. Thomas Aquinas believed that the happiness which we would realize when we finally saw God was the ultimate reason for God’s creation of us. God has created the good things of this life for us to enjoy and use, and in all our seeking for joy, for contentment, for happiness, we are in fact seeking to know our Creator, whether we realize it or not. This seeking will never end in this life, because final and complete happiness eludes us until we finally see God. In the words of St. Augustine: “you have

created us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

At the same time, it needs to be pointed out that the images of self-death and self-denial in Scripture are always connected with following Christ. “Take up your cross and follow me,” Jesus says. “We are baptized into Christ’s death,” says Paul. Now the orthodox dogma states that the incarnate Jesus Christ is “true God of true God.” When the Love of God entered our world, its final end was crucifixion. When God entered our world, he entered not as a conquering despot, not as a self-important Wall Street tycoon, but as a Galilean peasant who associated with those who were lacking in self-esteem, the uneducated blue collar workers of his day, the prostitutes, the “poor of the land.” Jesus’ message for them was that his Father’s kingdom was given to them, not in spite of the fact that they were sinners, but because they were sinners—that God loves sinners. But Jesus so upset the self-important good and powerful people of his day that they had him done away with. Those who did Jesus in were not in fact evil men, but good men, good men who could not bear to be forgiven because this would expose their goodness as evil. It is the nature of our good societies to not be able to tolerate those who expose their hypocrisy.

But these tensions are also in our very selves. We are torn between different loves. We value different objects. On the one hand, if we are members of the Church, we have chosen to follow the way of Jesus. On the other, we live in a world which does not embrace the values of Jesus, but the values of self-affirmation. And we are torn between following the way of Christ, the way of forgiveness, and of loving to the point of suffering, even death, if necessary, and the way of our society, which says that we must do what we can to get ahead, to look out for number one. So the way of following Christ can be painful, a kind of death as it conflicts with the values of our culture. But the values of the culture itself, because

they are about affirming the self, inevitably lead to conflict with others, who are affirming their own selves, and to the slavery of various forms of addiction.

Each one of us also suffers from the problem of the "false self." The self we are is not the self that God has intended us to be. Although God has created us to share in his love, we are in fact born into this world self-centered. Theologians call this original sin. Martin Luther referred to it as the "self which is turned in on itself." It is this self which we want to love not as our neighbor, but in preference to our neighbor. When we are driving down a road, all telephone poles are the same size, but the one which is closest appears bigger. It is the same with ourselves. The self which is closest to me, my own, appears bigger and more important to me than the others. If I am to love these others for whom Jesus also has died, it is this self-love to which I must die, the self-love which prefers my own good to yours, or even to God's. To die to self means to die to the self-love which says to my neighbor "me and my goods but not yours," and to God, "the good of my self, rather than the true good for which you have created me."

As the Anglican priest (and spiritual writer) Thomas Traherne pointed out, the problem is not that we love too much, but that we love too little. God alone is worthy of our love because God alone is identical with love. God has given us this world and its goods and has given us one another to be enjoyed, but also to be offered back to him as a sacrifice of thanksgiving. The same is true of our own self. God has made us for himself. He has created us out of love that he might love us and that we might love him in return. We are called to the unimaginable compliment of friendship with our Creator. God's goal for us is neither self-affirmation, nor self-renunciation, but our self in an eternal loving relation with his self. This is the way to true freedom.

But the love out of which God has created us we may hoard as

misers hoard gold. We may choose to live as if our selves were our own good rather than the God who alone can be the good of our selves. And the irony is that this choice, which we think of as the freedom to "be ourselves," is a kind of slavery, a narcissistic self-addiction, which turns us in on ourselves, rather than returning in Love to the Love which created us. God's will is for our good and can only be for our good, but in order to know our true good, it may be necessary to die to the slavery of false goods.

This realization can lead us to despair. For how can we escape the prison of our own selves? If God is truly love, and wishes us to love him in return, how can we learn to live in the exchange of divine and human love, especially if we are inextricably entangled in the web of a false self-centered love? This question is the first stage in the awareness of sin. And this awareness leads to a new goodness, the awareness of mercy. It is not that the God who has created us out of love is not concerned with our sins. Rather, by dealing with our sins in the mercy of the cross, God has shown that he is really concerned that we be reconciled with him, and sin is our refusal of that reconciliation. The problem is not that he is estranged from us, but that we continually push him away in pursuit of some other good. During this time of Lent, the Church provides each one of us with an opportunity to return to the God of compassion, the God who has made us out of love to be united to him in love. The question of how to return is the question of grace, and grace is just the shorthand word for how we come to share in the love and life of God the Father through the crucifixion and resurrection of his Son, and the presence of his Spirit who draws us back to him. In returning to Him, we return to the One who has made us for himself, and to our true self, to the transformation of that self so that we can return the Love of the One who created us in Love, to be the true self which our Creator has always intended us to be. And that is perfect freedom.



*O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men: Grant unto they people that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*