

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017  
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany: Jesus Wants Us To Die  
Rev. John Crow

Exodus 20:1-17  
Psalm 119:1-16  
1 Corinthians 3:1-9  
Matthew 5:21-24, 27-30, 33-37

To be, or not to be- that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them. To die- to sleep-  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die- to sleep.  
To sleep- perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub!  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause.

Does death give you pause? Maybe more than that: maybe the thought of death fills you with fear or dread. Many years ago, when I sold life insurance, I was taught that most people have trouble even discussing (and therefore preparing for) their own demise. Despite our reluctance, I want to spend a few minutes today on this cheery topic. Actually, I'm not talking about physical death. I want to discuss the death that Christ actually calls us to—the death to self.

The problems we find described today in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians are division and jealousy. Because of this, Paul says the believers in Corinth are immature; meaning, they haven't yet died to self. This underlying problem reveals itself as people claiming to be disciples of different people, such as Paul or Apollos. I would like to discuss the issues of division, jealousy, and also pride each in turn briefly, and then see how death to self is the solution. Not only that, but how death to self is really ***the challenge*** of the Christian life, and the only way to fulfill God's vision for our lives.

The church in Corinth was divided. This was evident from the quarreling Paul mentioned in his letter. Some claimed to be disciples of Paul, and some of Apollos. They were making unnecessary distinctions, which instead of promoting unity in the body, promoted divisions. This clearly wasn't as simple as mere observations about who had disciple whom, or Paul wouldn't have mentioned it. The believers in Corinth were choosing teams as it were. There's no place for competition among followers of Christ. That is why Paul chides them as acting according to the flesh; which means acting like the World. Those who follow Christ are not to behave like those who live for the World. We are to be united in Christ—able to overlook petty differences. Because when the light of Christ

shines bright in our lives, all competing influences must fade. This is precisely what Paul didn't see happening in Corinth.

Jealousy compounds the divisions found in the Corinthian church, because it keeps divisions from healing. If a particular division heals, jealousy will bring another one about. Then as now, jealousy keeps one focused on the things of the World, rather than the things of the Kingdom. That is why it is both ironic, and so pathetic, that the jealousy displayed by the church at Corinth was over spiritual matters. They couldn't even discuss issues related to their spiritual life without doing so in an utterly worldly way. Just as with divisions, jealousy is a sign of spiritual immaturity. A jealous spirit is one that is so lost in the temporal life, and comparisons of what each person has, that there is little room left for seeing the face of God. Jealousy is a result of the self killing Christ, rather than dying for Christ.

Pride is likely the underpinning of the jealousy and divisions on display at the church in Corinth. It is the self turned inward—the self enthroned. Pride is pernicious because it rarely reveals itself. Divisions and jealousy are much easier to spot, but they are more the sprouts of pride's roots. I feel a little like a broken

record, because it seems like all my sermons touch on the issue of pride at some point. That is either because it is a particular concern of mine, or...because anywhere we find sin of some sort, pride is there lurking in the shadows. I think it goes without saying that pride will always stand in the way of the death to self to which Christ calls us.

Most Christians would say that Christ died for us. And so He did. He also came to give us abundant life. Yet the irony is, that abundant life is through the door of death. It sounds strange to say it, but Christ wants us to die. He wants us to die to self, and to the ways of the World. Only then can we put Jesus on the throne of our hearts. It would be a different story if it were only a death to self; if it were not also a personal coronation of our Lord; if it did not lead to abundant life now, and eternity in the life to come. That would be a death of no great value. But the death to self **does** do all that, if we allow it. We all die; but some deaths are worth more than others.

In August of 1996, Cindy Parolin took her three children horseback riding in the wilderness east of Vancouver, British Columbia. Cindy's youngest child, Steven, fell off his horse when it was spooked by a cougar, which then pounced on him.

Cindy jumped off her horse and attacked the cougar with the closest stick she could find, which allowed her other two children to get their 6 year-old brother away from the cougar. While they rode to safety, Cindy kept the cougar's attention focused on her. Little Steven needed 70 stitches on his head, but his Mom never got to see her children again. Cindy Parolin laid down her life for her child. Mrs. Parolin's physical death meant something. Our spiritual death should likewise.

Death to self heals divisions because we begin to see things from our Lord's perspective. Differences within the body become far less important than that which unites us. Death to self heals jealousy, because Christ enthroned in our hearts keeps our focus on Him, rather than on the things of the World. Of what can one be jealous, when one gets to serve the King of Kings? Finally, death to self heals pride, because the minute we get off the throne and allow Christ His rightful place, pride cannot exist there. It's either self and pride, or Christ—there is no in between.

I said earlier that death to self is really ***the challenge*** of the Christian life, and that it is the only way to fulfill God's vision for our lives. I say that for three reasons.

First, the Christian life really only has two parts: Faith, which leads to salvation; and death to self, which is sanctification. Compared to saving faith, death to self is much harder, and requires much more from us. We are saved through a conversion process that once one is saved, never needs to be repeated. Dying to self, on the other hand, has to be repeated daily. “Take up the[ir] cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23), Jesus said. So when I say the word, “sanctification,” today, think the **process** of growing in spiritual maturity, rather than entire sanctification, which some would consider our spiritual destination. So this struggle to continually recommit to dying to self makes it more challenging.

Secondly, dying to self is completely counter to our natural instincts. I’m not talking about survival instincts, but rather the instinct to be in control. Since the time we were children, we have longed for control over our lives, and fight bitterly anything that tries to take it away from us. The process of sanctification is about giving up the very control we long for, and allowing Christ to have it. Giving over control of our lives gives us pause because we don’t know what God will do with us. Just as Hamlet in his famous soliloquy feared the unknown that follows death, so we too fear giving up the throne of our hearts.

Finally, just as Jesus' death on the cross was more murder than suicide, our death to self cannot be done by ourselves. Sanctification is a work of grace performed by God. We can either resist or not, but we cannot do it on our own. I personally spent many years trying to do this by my own willpower. Imagine my relief when I realized that sanctification is no more an act of will than salvation is—both are works of God's grace. Let's not be passive, though. We can very much work with God's plan for our lives, growing in spiritual maturity daily; or we can kick and scream "NO!" just like a toddler who doesn't want to go down for a nap. Believe me, I know all about this one.

Before I wrap up, there are two more questions that I think need answering. One, *how, exactly, do we work with God to bring about death to self?* and two, *what is the result of doing so?* The first answer is quite simple, but not easy. We simply obey God. He leads the dance, and we follow. When we make a mistake and step on someone's toes, we keep dancing and try not to do it again. Since the founding of the Church, followers of Christ have debated the role of good works in salvation. I believe that because Christianity is about our relationship with Christ, our good works, or obedience, is both a fruit of being regenerated, and what empowers us to grow in spiritual maturity. How can we expect to grow in

spiritual maturity if we won't listen to what God is telling us now? Like the Corinthian church, we can never handle solid food until we have proven we can handle milk.

The result of a death to self that leads to Christ enthroned in our hearts is a radical change in every area of our lives. I've already discussed the result as it applies to relationships within the community, but now let's focus on the results on the individual. First, there is the reward that we are promised in verse eight of 1 Corinthians, chapter three, which is according to our labors. I talked about obedience earlier, but I didn't mention that God promises to reward us in some form based on our obedience. During our discussion time last week Pastor Thelander referred to Revelation 14:13, where it says our deeds will follow us into eternity. That certainly gives more weight to what we do in this life.

Second, death to self leads to a sort of spiritual promotion. Our passage today in 1 Corinthians is bookmarked on either end with this idea of a sort of spiritual ranking. At the beginning, we are "fleshly"—"mere men." I say, "we," because we are part of the extended, universal audience of Paul's letter. At the end of today's passage, we can rise to being "God's fellow workers" (σύνεργοι). Have you

ever thought of being God’s coworker? Those who never give up control of their lives to Christ will never experience this. They may be saved, though immature Christians. As verse nine describes such people, they are “the field,” rather than those who work the field.

There is one more result of sanctification through death to self that I need to discuss. If we are truly dead, and Christ reigns in our hearts, then there is no limit to what He can accomplish through us. Our abilities—or lack thereof—are of no consequence. The limitless power of the Holy Spirit can use us as individuals and as a congregation, to accomplish whatever He wills. This is a hard teaching for me, because as a member of the clergy, I feel the weight of this truth lies more heavily on my shoulders. My lack of faith, my lack of spirit imagination, and my tiny comfort zone have held me back from helping Epworth to live up to its kingdom potential. If we truly allowed our self to die, and enthroned Christ instead, it would be standing room only here today. The broken, the poor, the downtrodden, and those who mourn would be forming a line out the door to get a glimpse of how true kingdom people worship an almighty God who has been unleashed from the box we put Him in! Instead of settling for less faith, less grace, less mercy and less love, we need to be asking for more, more more.

So as we prepare to come to the table today, I encourage you to put an end to divisions, jealousy, and pride, by putting an end to yourself through obedience to the very Christ you enthrone in your heart. In partaking of the bread and wine, we follow Christ's example of allowing our own desires to die, so that our lives might mean something much greater. And may the grace we receive today empower us to get out of God's way, and allow His Kingdom to be revealed in our lives and in the Treasure Valley, beyond anything we can imagine.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.