

IN IT FOR MYSELF

In many places in Christendom today, there is a strange thought-pattern that has grown into the proportions of a creed – a belief system that very few people even seem to question. It is the assumption and expectation that Christians are, or at least ought to be, *selfless* – that Christianity is always about “others.”

In the end, and predictably, this leads to the conclusion that the church is *for* others. Pretty soon, we are perfectly willing to let others have it. If the church is for others, let *them* come to worship, and run the programs, and give the money and the time and the energy to keep it alive. Then we can go do something that matters to *us*. *They* can have the church, *and* the Christian Faith. And pretty soon, this vague “they” are the only ones who care about Christianity, or practice any of it. So then we sit on the sidelines and cheer dutifully at Christmas and Easter, knowing it’s really good for *them* (the others), but it has little or nothing to do with us.

A false premise can never come out right, no matter how hard we try to redeem it. Something that is always “for others” can never be about *anybody*. It’s a shell game. The moment it starts to light somewhere, we shift it on to still *others*. It’s like the “tomorrow” that never comes. In any case, I want to convince you this morning, if I can, that people who think that Christianity or the church is for others are doing enormous damage to Christ’s purposes, and they are also cheating themselves out of the most important thing in life.

This Creed of Selflessness, even after you see its fatal flaw, is hard to shake. It keeps clinging to us like a cellophane wrapper charged with static electricity. We throw it from us, yet discover that it has come back upon us like some mystic boomerang. I suppose this is because it hooks our pride. We would like to be so mature and complete that we have no needs for ourselves. And besides, we have played with false images and definitions for so long that we actually believe them. True saints are selfless, we think. The lives of true Christians are marked with great acts of self-sacrifice. (True, of course, but not for the reasons we think.) One of the most frequent remarks we make about people we admire is that they have no personal motives – that they seek no personal gain – as if that were some kind of compliment, a trait which lifts them to a higher plane and deserves our adulation.

Well, you say, Van Blair is just jealous. Since he is not selfless or self-sacrificing, he tries to put down others who are. Maybe so. At least you can be very sure that whether I should or shouldn't be selfless and self-sacrificing, I am not. And I do not want Christianity just for you; I want it for me, too. As a matter of fact, by New Testament definitions, that makes me a saint. It has nothing to do with selflessness, and very little to do with perfection. It has everything to do with how much *we* believe in Jesus and want Him in our lives, and how much we want what Jesus offers us.

In any case, I do not think the saints are selfless; I think they go after different goals. It is not that they have no needs or desires, but that they see behind the surface needs and desires to the truer needs and desires. And that is what they go after. Do you know the old Taoist story?

In the south there is a bird. It is called *yuan-ch'u*. Have you heard of it? (It is related to the wild geese.) This *yuan-ch'u* starts from the southern ocean and flies to the northern ocean. During its whole journey, it perches on no tree save the sacred Wo-tung; it eats no fruit save that of the Persian Lilac; it drinks only at the Magic Well. But it happened one day that an owl that had gotten hold of the rotting carcass of a rat looked up as the *yuan-ch'u* flew over, and, terrified lest the great bird should stop and snatch at its morsel, it screamed, "Shoo! Shoo, *yuan-ch'u!*" And thus, afterward, the owl congratulated itself on being so fierce, and later, in a more thoughtful mood, it exclaimed, "What a selfless and self-sacrificing bird this *yuan-ch'u*, that it did not try to rob me of my little piece of rat."

So it is not that Christians are selfless, but that "rat" doesn't look very good to them after having tasted Persian Lilac. They are after different things – they have different goals and values. It's not that they make greater sacrifices, but that they cease to want some things that many other people greatly desire. They go after other things, with fire and passion, that many people in our society do not see as valuable and would not accept if you handed those things to them – things like humility, patience, serenity, a close personal relationship with the Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ.

There is a principle of emptying one's self in order to be filled ... of surrendering in order to come into one's own ... of dying in order to truly LIVE. The Cross represents to us not only an event in history which changed the world, but a principle of Life which continually changes us. That is core truth for us. If we catch a lot of derision or dissent from those who do not yet understand it, what does that matter to us? It is the way true Life works. Are we then to apologize or rework the truth Christ has given us, so that others will not be upset with us?

For us it is neither grim nor selfless that we follow the Way of the Cross. It does not lead to the loss of self, but to finding our true selves. What did Jesus give up on that night in Gethsemane? The chance to be a successful rabbi somewhere in Galilee? Who wants rat after they have tasted Persian Lilac? The scribes and Pharisees were saying, "Shoo! Shoo *yuan-ch'u!*" But Jesus was not after what they had. Jesus, in our tradition, "sitteth at the right hand of God the Father almighty ... liveth and reigneth with him forevermore." I use the old language to remind you that this is not some newfangled perspective or some new twist I have tried to put on things. The twist some of you think I keep putting on things is coming from solid Christian theology. But it sounds unusual to some of you because you have been listening to more recent teachers from other traditions and to tacked-on concepts from the Middle Ages. Part of the earliest message of the Christian Faith is that eternal Life in God's Kingdom is worth a few years of trial and tribulation in this boot camp called earth.

Our adversaries tease us a lot about this kind of thinking. Are you afraid of their taunts? Their voices drip with scorn as they speak of "pie in the sky, by and by." And sometimes they even try to make it look like we have caused the pain and injustice in the world by believing that this world's rewards are not the highest goals humans can live for. "Religion ... is the opiate of the people," they say. Karl Marx, by the way, has never been my favorite theologian. Have you some reason to be impressed by his Christology?

It should not surprise us that those who love the world better than God's Kingdom would say such things. Those who do not really believe there is a Life beyond this one would naturally consider it foolish to sacrifice very much in the here and now to prepare for a realm they do not think exists. Logic does depend upon its presuppositions! So we all have to make up our own minds: Jesus is stupid, or Jesus is Lord and Christ. But it really is foolishness to pretend one truth and then live by

the logic of another. That way you get the worst of both worlds. So let's make up our minds: Do we belong to Christ, or do we belong to some other? (Marx, or spouse, or self, or children, or fame, or ???) From the biblical perspective, as you know, there is no atheism – only idolatry.

The point is, we are not being selfless or self-sacrificing to follow Jesus, except perhaps in the eyes of those who do not realize why or what we are after. Why would Frank Laubach rather spend time praying than time making money? Why would Mother Teresa rather care for the sick than be an executive in some large corporation? They are not being selfless; they are “onto something” that has become enormously important and valuable to them. And don't you know there are some business executives who are just as saintly as Mother Teresa – and who do at least as much, or more, good?

It is not true, by the way, that Christians are *only* after long-term rewards. We all want rewards, and the sooner they come the better. Only, we never know when the rewards will come. We choose our goals, go after them, and try to match our lives to the patterns and the truth we believe will bring us to our chosen ends. We are open and willing for the rewards to come at any time. Whatever the goals, some return on our efforts will come almost immediately. Sometimes we do not like the return and have to change the goals. But if the goals are good, the return keeps increasing the longer we stay faithful to the quest.

To be redundant: The difference is not in whether we want rewards, but in what rewards we want. The difference is not between being selfless and being selfish; the difference is in the goals we have chosen. However, there are some people (and I have at times been among them) who spend a portion of their lives in sort of a Twilight Zone. They are not quite alive, and not quite dead either. They have no clear goals for themselves, at least none they can consciously identify. They have not chosen a clear path with zeal or commitment. They are afraid to take risks, yet they crave excitement. They are lonely, but do not trust themselves or anyone else enough to try for real relationship. They are often found on the fringes of various groups and organizations, including the church. And they do, sometimes, go into selfless and sacrificial modes with no awareness of the goals or purposes that justify such expenditures. At the tail end of my drinking days, I was often quite selfless, and frequently very self-sacrificing. The depression that comes with too much alcohol made it seem to me like nothing mattered very much anymore anyway. So since I didn't much care – if you wanted it, you could have it. Some people

mistook this for generosity. Are you *sure* you want to be selfless and self-sacrificing?

In my opinion, that is a long way from sainthood. Some people pay the price but get no reward. They walk the Path but see none of the glory. They burn out in a few months or years, or move from organization to organization. They spread sadness and negation wherever they go. They always do more harm than good, no matter how hard they try. It is because the personal motive is missing. The energy source is lacking. They run on their own batteries, and these are bound to run down if they don't get recharged from the Source that is beyond us.

Coming down to it: When it comes to the Christian church, there are many people who are not in it for themselves. You can tell because everything about their participation is what we used to call "half-hearted." There is always something meager and joyless and stingy about the way they go about their lives. And I do not want any of you to be among them. It is no fun for anybody, and least of all for Jesus.

Getting off theory, and theology, for a moment, let's just talk straight experience. I think back over the years of the people who have told me they were not in it for themselves. Rated in order of frequency and appearance, and also by the amount of problems they created, here are the categories:

- *I'm in it for my children. I don't need the church myself. I'm busy and have little extra time, but I want my children to have a Christian upbringing.* Well, children do not have a Christian upbringing unless their parents are into Christianity themselves, and for themselves. And that is true no matter how you slice it!

- *I'm in it for my wife (spouse/husband/significant other). She likes it. I just come along to keep her happy.* Once, years ago, I made the mistake of replying, "Have you noticed how happy she really is?" Both of them stopped coming, for a while.

- *I'm in it because it contributes to the morality of our society.*

- *I'm in it for the business or political contacts it provides me.*

- *I'm in it to get help for a social cause I'm working for.*

- *I'm in it because I hope to join with others who want to help others.* Of course, they want to help them "outside the church," and keep them "outside the church."

To be fair, some of these people get involved in the church and then come in contact with the Bible, and with faithful people, and with the Holy Spirit. Some of them get converted – meaning, they start to comprehend that Christianity is really for them too – and then they begin to pay back for all the trouble they have caused. They do not always know they have caused a lot of trouble, by the way, but, intentionally or unintentionally, they tried to sidetrack the church from its real purposes. That is inevitable, if you believe Christianity is for others but not for you. This is not just a potshot at them; this is what they say of themselves: that it is not something they want for themselves. So they are constantly trying to change the Message of the Gospel, slowing things down, getting in the way, trying to dilute the commitment, confusing the newcomers, and, most of all, turning attention away from Jesus Christ.

I am quite serious. It is a huge problem in today's church. What is the purpose and function of the church of Jesus Christ? Are you in it to save somebody else? Are you in it to save the world, or the poor, or the immoral, or the lonely? Or are *you* the lost, the lonely, the sinner, or the alienated one who needs saving? Are you in it for yourself? Let's get it stark and clear: Is the purpose of the church to save the world, or to save you? The world is ending, you are not.

Put it another way: Is Christianity an authentic Way of Life, or is it just a means to some other ends? Is the Christian Way intrinsically valuable in and of itself – in its own right – or is it just a gimmick or a tool to be used to get others back on track, so we can all go back to living the *American Way* instead of the Christian Way?

How we understand and comprehend such matters changes the way we approach and decide everything. Do you invite people to church and want more kids in Sunday School or in youth groups so that we will have an impact on the society around us? Or so that some people can come here and dedicate their own lives to loving God and following Jesus Christ?

The Scripture passages for this morning were chosen to remind us that Jesus did indeed appeal to His followers on the basis of their highest self-interest. Jesus is not into selflessness. He loves *you!* If you go selfless, there will be nothing left to love. Jesus is after the higher self – the true self – not the loss of self. One picks up no hint from Peter or Paul or any of the early disciples that they were doing some kind of dismal religious duty and expecting nothing for themselves – that they

were impersonally and stoically following some intellectual vision out of a sense of selfless obligation. No, they were afire with what they had seen and been told, and with what they knew themselves to be invited into. It sounded better to them than anything they had ever heard before. Peter was not sitting on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, weeping over the pile of fish he had to leave in order to follow Jesus. (Shoo! Shoo *yuan-ch'u!*)

It was the mark of the early Christian community that it was full of enthusiasm, full of expectation, even sometimes in the midst of terrible persecution. And its people were terribly pleased with the kind of Life Jesus had opened up for them. They were in it for themselves, and they loved sharing it with each other, and with anybody else who wanted to come get some for themselves. They were willing to make any sacrifice to keep this New Life whenever the world forced the issue, but they were not self-sacrificing. Quite the contrary: they would not let go of this New Life for money, for fame, for Caesar, or for Satan himself.

In any case, without apology or subtlety, Jesus speaks to us directly of rewards. He consciously and purposefully compares the rewards of the world with the rewards of His Kingdom. There are trade-offs; He makes that quite clear. And there is suffering to go through, and there are many principles He tries to make clear for us. But the message is loud and clear: *“Great is your reward in heaven!”* And Heaven, remember, does not wait for later, but begins whenever we truly enter the Kingdom. It is far from completion in any of our experiences here, but its reality and rewards begin immediately. *“And Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times as much at this time, and, in the age to come, eternal life.’”* (Luke 18:29-30)

So Jesus stresses rewards that we want for ourselves as the motive for listening and following. God is the highest value. To know God, to be in God's presence, to experience God's *shalom* ... is the greatest of riches – the highest value – and worth forsaking anything and everything necessary in order to obtain it. The saints are not selfless; they want the highest and best they have ever heard about. They are not *better* than any of you; they have just seen some toys and goodies that some of you have not noticed yet.

If you are not in it for yourself, I hope today will cause you to reconsider your goals and motives. Are God, God's Kingdom, and God's church on earth worth anything to you personally? It is an insult to

Christ to be in it for any lesser reason. Jesus says, “I really love you. Will you marry me?” And you reply, “Well, actually, I have no personal interest, but I’ll keep dating you in the hope that maybe my sister will become interested.” Yuck!

How would *you* like to be told that your spouse married you for your mother, or for security, or because of the children? Do you think it pleases Jesus, or God, if you are in it for others but not for yourself? When it comes down to it, you are all you have to offer. If you don’t care about it for yourself, it is worth nothing! And the people you are trying to help are not so stupid that they cannot see through the ruse, and realize that you are trying to hand them something that you yourself think has no value.

We must learn to say what is really true behind the false Creed of Selflessness: That *we* are sold. That *we* believe. That *we* love Jesus, and the God Jesus reveals. That we love the Kingdom and all it stands for. That it draws us, and we want to live for it more than for any other purpose on earth.

Please, dear friends: Stop all the altruism. Be done with fake motives and false humility. Stop being merely religious, and let yourselves hear and love Jesus for who Jesus really is. Only after we admit how important God is to us, do we have any chance of knowing how important we are to God, or of being able to live for him.

Be in it for yourself. Do it for yourself. And love God, yourself, personally.