

IN IT FOR MYSELF

In many places in Christendom, there has grown a strange thought-pattern that has become very much like a modern creed – a belief system that very few people seem even to question. It is the assumption and expectation that Christians are, or at least ought to be, *selfless* – that Christianity is always about *others*. We should not want or need anything for ourselves. God will not like us very much, and Jesus will like us even less, if we have any ulterior motives. “Ulterior” is seldom defined, but if it were, it would mean “personal.” An “ulterior motive” is when you want something for yourself. It is then claimed that Jesus had no personal or ulterior motives Himself. And so His mission – His church – is so anemic, pointless, and boring that the only people drawn to the Christian Life are those who have given up on life, on themselves, and, under the surface, on others too.

In the end, and predictably, this leads to the conclusion that the church is *only* for *others*. Pretty soon, we are perfectly willing to let *others* have it. If the church is for *others*, let them come to worship, run the programs, and give the money and time and energy to keep it alive. Then we can go do something that matters to *us*. Some people still sit on the sidelines and cheer dutifully at Christmas or Easter, knowing it might still be meaningful or good for *others*, but it has little or nothing to do with them. In short, I want to convince you today, 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 of our own. Besides, we have played with false images and definitions for so long that lots of people have actually come to believe them. So now *everybody* knows that true saints are selfless. And the lives of *true* Christians are marked with great acts of self-sacrifice. And one of the most frequent remarks our society makes about people to be admired is that they have no personal motives – that they seek no personal gain. Is this some kind of compliment? Show me a selfless person, and I will get as far away from them as I possibly can. I know for sure that they will never want

anything good to happen to me or anybody I care about. They do not want anything for themselves, so they certainly will not want anything for me. The whole principle of neighbor love that Jesus teaches has been thrown out the window. (Love your neighbor “as” yourself?)

Well, some might 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 certain that, whether I should or should not be selfless and self-sacrificing, I am not! I do not want Christianity just for you. I want to be a Christian too! Christianity has nothing to do with selflessness, and very little to do with perfection. It has to do with how much we *trust* God and how much we want what Jesus offers us.

In any case, you can no longer convince me that the saints are selfless. It is not that they have no needs or desires, but that they see *behind* the surface needs and desires to the truer purposes, greater goals, and far better rewards. *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 swoop down and try to snatch its pathetic little 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 piece of rat.”

It is not that Christians are selfless, but that “rat” does not look very appealing to them after having tasted Persian Lilac. They are after different things, different goals, different values. It is not that they make greater sacrifices, but they cease to want some things that many other people greatly desire. And with fire and passion they go after other things 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, serenity, a close personal relationship with the Holy Spirit of Jesus 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 spiritual 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, what does that matter to us? Shall we go after "rat" just so we will fit in better? We die to the "old life" because it no longer seems valuable. Baptism is a very willing dying, and so is being raised to New Life.

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 self. Is it despicable that some of us listen all the way to the end of one of Jesus' sentences? "*Whoever wants to save his life will lose it ...*" That is only the first half of the sentence. The rest: "*... but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.*" We lose our old lives in order to find true LIFE, and our true selves. (Luke 9:24) Jesus never throws life away; He never destroys it. It is a sad thing when we get Jesus mixed up with Satan. Baptism – rebirth, dying to the old way – is often challenging and mysterious to us, but its purpose is never the negation of Life. It is to *save* our lives and to find our *true* selves: to discover our true purpose, our true gifts, our true vocatio, our true nature and character.

So why *do* we give up our lives? Is it because we are so noble – so highly evolved spiritually? Is it because we are selfless, "above it all" – so superior to those around us? Not at all. Through a series of encounters and awakenings, we begin to realize that we live in a partial world – a world full of illusion, shadow, denial, half-truths, and incomplete people. Our true purpose and our true selves are hidden even from our own awareness. We have to be "called out," NAMED, reassured – told we are valuable – by some Authority who cares about us beyond belief. Until that happens, we do not "see it," believe it, or even imagine that such a thing could be remotely or possibly true. In our tradition, we most often call it the "Holy Spirit," but even that is only a name we have assigned to a reality far beyond our understanding.

We do not even see the flame until it comes for us, though we do sometimes see the smoke where the flame used to be. Some disgruntled shepherd, whose life is clearly over, turns aside to behold a burning bush. We would not believe any part of this encounter for thirty seconds, except the world has never been the same since:

Israel really was freed from slavery in Egypt. Just so with Jesus at His baptism; Peter at the great catch of fish; Paul on the way to Damascus. And I do not know how each of you got started coming here, but I do remember something about how I did. And my grave suspicion is that our stories are not all over with even yet.

This place is not for the selfless. Prayer is the most selfish thing we ever do. We want a relationship and conversation with the Numinous Other – with the ONE who sees us far more clearly than any of us see ourselves or each other. And if we are “seen,” will we not also be “called” and invited and pruned and sent?

What did Jesus give up on that night in Gethsemane? The chance to be a successful rabbi somewhere in Galilee? For that He should give up being God’s Messiah? 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 merely untwisting some of the aberrations that current fear and superstition are trying to superimpose onto the Christian Faith.

Part of the basic 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 we call “earth.” That does not mean we like to suffer or that we think suffering is good for us or for others. It only reminds us not to throw away what really matters when life in this broken realm gets hard.

Our adversaries tease us a lot about this kind of thinking. Are we 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 opium of the people.” Karl Marx, by the way, has never been my favorite theologian. The truth is: atheism is the true opium of the people, because if there is no God, we will never be held accountable for anything we ever think or say or do.

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 realm would naturally consider it foolish to sacrifice anything in the here and now to prepare for what is to come. 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 we 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, spouse, self, children, fame, or ???) From the biblical perspective, as you know, there is no atheism – only idolatry.

The point is, we are not being selfless or sacrificial to follow Jesus. No matter what it may cost us, there is no better deal to be had anywhere in Life – not now; not ever. 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 were not being selfless; they were “on to something” that had become enormously important and valuable to them. And don't you know that there are some business executives who are just as saintly as Mother Teresa was, and who do far more to bless the lives of others?

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. Yet 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 to the truth we believe will bring us to our chosen ends. But 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. And 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. The difference is 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 part of their lives in sort of a Twilight Zone. They are not quite alive, yet they are 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 they do not trust themselves or anyone else 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. “Nothing matters much anymore anyway, so who gives a damn?” Feeling alone and close to despair, it is easy to be generous. Is that our definition of Christianity – our notion of what it means to follow Christ?

Getting back to it: When it comes to the Christian church, there are many people who are not in it for themselves. They are only thinking of others. And I do not want any of you to be among them. Not ever!

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 that 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 some of the categories:

- 1.) *I’m in it for my children. I don’t need the church myself. I’m busy and fulfilled myself, 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 cut it.
- 2.) *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 ever noticed how happy she really is?” Both of them stopped coming for a while.
- 3.) *I’m in it because it contributes to the morality of our society.*
- 4.) *I’m in it for the business or political contacts it provides me.*
- 5.) *I’m in it to get help for a social cause I’m working for.*
- 6.) *I’m in it because I hope to join with others who want to help others.* In our time and in the liberal church, it is assumed that helping others has nothing to do with Jesus or inviting people into a deeper relationship with God.

To be fair, some of these people who get involved in the church eventually come in contact with the Bible, with faithful people, 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 did not always know they had caused a lot of trouble, but, intentionally or unintentionally, they had tried to sidetrack the church from its true purposes. This is inevitable if you believe that Christianity is for others but not for yourself. People who believe this 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 turning attention away from Jesus the Christ.

It has become a huge problem in almost every version of modern Christianity. What is the purpose and function of the church of Jesus Christ? Are we in it to save somebody else? Are we in it to save the world or the poor or the immoral or the lonely? Or are we lost ourselves? Are we lonely ourselves? Are we the sinners – the alienated ones who need to be saved? 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; for better or for worse, you are not.

Put 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 get on with our own opinions and our own purposes? Don't you love it when life is never about what it is really about?

How we understand and comprehend such matters changes the way we approach and decide everything. Do you invite people to church or want more kids in Sunday School or want more young people in our youth groups so we will have an impact on the society around us? Or so more people will come here and dedicate their lives to loving God and following Jesus the 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-interests. Jesus is not into selflessness. Jesus is the Great Reconciler, constantly reminding us of the love of God. If God loves us – if Jesus loves us – and we go selfless, what will be left for God or Jesus 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 in return. No, they were *on fire* with what they had been told and invited into. It looked better to them than anything they had ever heard about 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 and 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 what they had found for money or fame or Caesar or Satan himself.

In any case, without apology or subtlety, Jesus speaks to us directly of rewards. He consciously and purposefully compares the rewards of this 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, and it is worth forsaking anything and everything necessary in order to obtain it. The saints are not selfless; they want the highest and best there is for themselves. They are not *better* than any of us; they have just seen some toys and goodies that some of us have not yet noticed. And yes, I suppose a few of us are still working for or hanging on to some things we have outgrown and no longer consider very valuable.

If you are not in it for yourself, I hope you will decide 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 do not 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 really is true behind the false Creed of Selflessness: That *we* are sold. That *we* believe. That *we* love the Kingdom and all it stands for. That it draws us, and that we want to live for it more than for any other purpose on earth. And that we want it and need it because *we* are the ones who are beginning to love back the One who has shown such love for us.

Please, dear friends: Stop all the altruism. Be done with fake motives and false humility. Stop being 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 our importance to God, or of being able to live for God.

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