
Great Expectations
Mark 8:31-38

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 4, 2012 by Christy Lohr Sapp

A few years ago, a number of my FaceBook friends listed their religious affiliations as “follower of Jesus”. I thought this was odd. Perhaps I am too entrenched in a denominational identity, but I’m not really sure what “follower of Jesus” means as a religious descriptor. Does it suggest that you are a Christian but don’t like the label? Does it imply that you think Jesus was a good guy or a worthy prophet, but that you do not believe him to be divine? Does it indicate that you read the Bible but do not go to church?

Today’s gospel suggests something about what my FaceBook friends wrote. This reading from Mark describes what it means to be a “follower of Jesus.” As a matter of fact, for those who look to scripture as a how-to guide for life, today’s gospel lesson gives some pretty clear direction: *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow me.*

Is this what my friends do? Deny themselves and take up their crosses? This is certainly the time of year when Christians talk a lot about denying themselves. Giving up sweets, or meat, or complaining for Lent is a good exercise – especially if it causes you to be more mindful of your consumption or irritability. But, Jesus is going for something a little deeper here. Generic self-denial has its place, but it does not necessarily lead to the cross. The second part of Jesus’ command moves us to a once and for all type of sacrifice that is much more difficult to embrace.

Jesus warns that living into his call can be a risky proposition. These directives run counter to what the world expects of us. In following Jesus as he outlines it here, you define your identity in relation to who Jesus is. You define your identity in relation to understanding the role God plays in your life. By doing this, you risk losing yourself, and ultimately, you risk death. Scary stuff.

Charles Dickens often wrote of characters who sacrificed themselves for the sake of others. He gives us two good illustrations of meaningful self-denial and cross-bearing. One involves an ascetic lifetime commitment. The other involves a dramatic act of selfless sacrifice. Both result in the loss of freedom and the loss of life.

In Great Expectations, Dickens tells the story of a young orphan boy, Pip. Pip rises from a life of poverty into the gentleman-class. He does this thanks to the generosity of an unknown benefactor.

The novel opens in a cemetery at dusk. Pip is at the grave of his parents and brothers when he is frightened by a dirty mess of a man in shackles. The man threatens Pip and orders the young boy to bring him a file and some food. Afraid of what the man will do if he does not comply, Pip returns home. His brother-in-law is Joe, the local blacksmith. From Joe and Pip sister’s house, Pip purloins a pork pie and one of Joe’s files. He dutifully takes them to the man in the graveyard. The man devours the pie like a starved animal and looks hungrily at Pip’s fat cheeks, as well.

Later, Pip and Joe are invited to join a search party to find two recently escaped convicts. They encounter the man who turns out to be one of the fugitives. Although a glimmer of recognition passes between them when he is brought before the search party, both Pip and the convict keep quiet about their previous encounters. Pip returns home with Joe. He carries both the guilt of his secret and the relief that he was not exposed. As time goes by, Pip receives a large sum of money quite unexpectedly. He leaves his sister, Joe and the blacksmith shop behind and happily makes a new life for himself. In London, he is transformed from a lowly, orphaned blacksmith's apprentice into a moneyed gentleman.

At times Pip wonders about his mysterious benefactor and speculates about who it could be. The identity of his patron remains a secret until sometime after his twenty-third birthday when Pip receives an unexpected visitor. He opens his door to find a ragged man who greets him with an uncomfortable familiarity. Now a gentleman, Pip is nothing if not hospitable, and he brings the man into his home. Over the course of the conversation and a bite to eat, Pip realizes something that horrifies him. He has watched this person eat before: on a dark night; in a cold graveyard. This is "his" convict. In short order, Pip comes to learn that his unknown sponsor has been none other than Abel Magwitch whom he encountered in the churchyard years ago. Magwitch has provided for Pip's education and grooming and is thrilled and genuinely delighted to see the gentleman that Pip has become. He is proud that his legitimately-earned money has gone to such a good cause. As he recounts his life over the years, he says, "Pip, I've made a gentleman of you! ... I swore that, sure as ever I earned a guinea, that guinea should go to you. I lived rough that you should live smooth."

I lived rough that you should live smooth. Magwitch denies himself. He undergoes derision for his past crimes. He suffers mockery for frugal lifestyle all in order to send more to Pip. He sacrifices personal comfort and fortune to see Pip flourish. He asks for nothing in return for the new life he has given Pip. His greatest joy comes in seeing Pip live as a gentleman.

This satisfaction of seeing Pip again comes at great personal cost, however. After his capture years earlier, Magwitch was exiled to a penal colony. To see the success Pip made of himself, Magwitch had to sneak back into England and evade the authorities. After their reunion, Magwitch is apprehended and sentenced to die. Yet, he dies a happy man because he has Pip at his side. Due to his irresistible love for Pip, Magwitch risks his life and, in the end, loses it.

Great Expectations is a story about one man denying himself for the sake of another. Magwitch's daily denial of life's little comforts for the sake of Pip's well-being, accumulate into a larger sacrifice of his freedom. It is also a story about the way identity is shaped by love, by faithfulness and by whom we follow. Magwitch's identity changes from "convict" to "benefactor". In learning to love Magwitch despite his colored past, Pip also changes. He becomes less self-absorbed and more willing to sacrifice himself for others. He also learns to deny himself.

For Magwitch and Pip self-denial moves beyond regularly forsaking creature comforts to reinventing themselves in relationship to love. The same thing happens to us today. As this morning's gospel teaches, in denying yourself you take up a new identity as a

follower of Christ. This is an identity steeped in love and sacrifice. This shifts the dynamic from what the world expects to what God expects.

This is where self-denial moves from the generic to the profound. This is how self-denial leads to abundant life. To live abundantly means to live generously. Abundance in the here and now is not about opulence, possessions, prestige and position. Rather abundance in the here and now involves abundant giving of one's self. This is ultimately what Pip learned from Magwitch.

Another Dickens novel gives a different model for costly discipleship. A Tale of Two Cities follows the ins and outs and interconnected histories of a few British and French families during the French Revolution. The people and events portrayed represent the struggles between social classes. The empathetic characters are the ones who struggle with the ethical implications of their positions and the moral weight of their actions.

The story revolves around Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton. The two are strikingly similar in appearance but dramatically different in temperament. Charles is a French nobleman who breaks ties with his family because he cannot abide their cruelty and discrimination. Sydney is a cynical and sharp British barrister who disappoints even himself with his lack of commitment and integrity. Both of them seek the affections of the golden-haired Lucie. In these two you find the classic romantic tug between the good boy and the rebel. Charles is the faithful, stable, but somewhat dull, suitor, and Sydney is the magnetic, but disreputable, one. Charles wins Lucie's hand, yet, Sydney's unrequited love for her drives him to become a better man. Sydney pledges to embrace any sacrifice for Lucie or her family. The story progresses over a decade and a half with Carton and the Darnays becoming friends.

After the storming of the Bastille, Charles is summoned by an old family servant who begs for assistance to gain release from a French prison. Charles' compassion and sense of responsibility for his family's spiteful past draw him back to France where he is arrested by the revolutionaries. Lucie and his daughter leave England to be with him as he is sentenced to die for the crimes of his ancestors. Charles Darnay becomes the representation of the 1%. He is revolutionary France's scapegoat for a history of oppression.

A Tale of Two Cities culminates in a remarkable twist. Sydney Carton learns of a plot to execute Lucie and her daughter, as well. He acts quickly to have Charles' family flee France. He then visits Charles in prison and tricks him into changing clothes with him. Sydney drugs him and has an unconscious Charles carried out of the jail. Charles' lifeless body is deposited in the same carriage that is taking Lucie out of the country. The family escapes to safety. In the mean time, Sydney voluntarily accepts Charles' death sentence. He stands in for him on the block. Sydney has given his friends an inconceivable gift. He has also redeemed himself. He goes to the guillotine radiating a prophetic sense of calm and peace. The narrator shares Sydney Carton's final thoughts, "*It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.*" His selfless act of courage conveys the weight of active sacrifice and voluntary service born out for friendship and love. It is dramatic and irrevocable. It reflects the ultimate model of taking up a cross of suffering for another.

Charles Darnay is an innocent. He suffers unjustly for the compassion he has for those around him. Sydney Carton is a martyr. He embraces his death as atonement for his ill-spent life. The imagery is clear. Dickens uses the phrase “recalled to life” throughout A Tale of Two Cities. Resurrection is an unmistakable theme. Just in case you miss the allusion to Christ in the final scenes of the book, Dickens hits it squarely home when Sydney seeks solace in repeating Christ’s words to himself in his final moments, “*I am the resurrection and the life.*” He also reassures a seamstress who is to be executed with him in much the same way that Christ comforts the criminal who dies alongside him. Sydney Carton is recalled to life in Charles and Lucie’s family for generations to come. His memory and dramatic sacrifice live on through their retelling of his noble act to their son who bears his name.

Sydney Carton goes beyond denying himself to taking up his cross. He does so actively and deliberately. This is the way it is presented in Mark’s gospel. Jesus does not say “Suffer your cross in silence.” He does not say “Tolerate your cross.” He says, “Take it up!” In other words, seek it out. Find it. Carry it. The cross is not something that happens to you like illness or unrequited love. It is not the imposition of life’s burdens on your daily routine. It is not merely a trying situation. Instead, it is something to which you actively commit. It is something that you embrace despite its difficulty. It is voluntary action for others. Taking up your cross means innocently suffering in the face of evil. It involves losing your life for the sake of the gospel. This is messy, risky stuff that is not to be entered into lightly.

This is also what it means to be a “follower of Jesus”. It means following his lead on love, following his lead on sacrifice and following his lead on forgiveness. This is where the expectations of this world clash with the expectations of God’s kingdom. Christ’s call to follow is a counter-cultural message. It entails putting others first and following a path that leads through the ugliness of Calvary to the glory of God’s love.

In Abel Magwitch and Sydney Carton we see a move from a generic kind of denial to ultimate sacrifice. Being a Christian requires both. Christianity requires both. It expects the daily denials that force you to live rough so that others may live smooth, and it expects the noble, “far, far better” act, as well.

Your life is a preparation for the Carton-like moment of truth, but the Magwitch-like daily denials have value, too. They stand as reminders of the constant need to live generously. Much like Pip and Magwitch, God’s expectation is to see you take what you have been given and do something beautiful and gentlemanly with it. Much like Darnay and Carton, God’s expectation is to see you willing to lose your life for the sake of the gospel.

The world’s expectation is self-preservation when God’s expectation is self-sacrifice. The world’s expectation is smooth living when God’s expectation is rough. Whose expectations will you meet?