

Homily – Sacrifice Your Acorn

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September 4, 2022 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church

Today I start with a story called “Acornology” originally told by Jacob Needleman. Once upon a time, in a not so far away land, there was a kingdom of acorns, nestled at the foot of a grand old oak tree. Since the citizens of this kingdom were modern, fully westernized acorns, they went about their business with purposeful energy, and since they were midlife, baby boomer acorns, they engaged in a lot of self-help courses. There were seminars called “getting all you can out of your shell.” There were woundedness recovery groups for acorns who had been bruised in their original fall from the tree. There were spas for oiling and polishing those shells and various acornopathic therapies to enhance longevity and well-being. One day in the midst of this kingdom there suddenly appeared a knotty little stranger, apparently dropped out of the blue by a passing bird. He was capless and dirty, making an immediate negative impression on his fellow acorns. And crouched beneath the oak tree, he stammered out of wild tale. Pointing upward at the tree he said we... are... that! Delusional thinking obviously, the other acorns concluded, but one of them continued to engage him in conversation. “So tell, us how would we become that tree?” Well, said he, pointing downward, “it has something to do with going into the ground... and cracking open the shell.” “Insane,” they responded. “Totally morbid! Why, then we wouldn’t be acorns anymore.”

Humor aside, the point is obvious, at least when it comes to acorns. An acorn is only a seed, it’s nature and destiny is to become an oak tree. Everyone knows this. What’s much more difficult is to apply the same parable to ourselves. This “I” whom I take to be myself, this individual who moves about on the planet making choices and doing his thing, is not who I am at all. It’s only the acorn. Coiled within this acorn is a vastly more majestic destiny and a true self who lives it. But this oak tree of myself can only come into being if I let go of being an acorn.

All traditional sacred psychologies are based on the premise that there are two “I”s who inhabit me, the lesser self, the acorn, and a greater self, whom I do not know yet and whose destiny I can live out. The names for these two selves vary from tradition to tradition, but the important point to keep in mind is that what our contemporary culture proudly calls ego, the functional seat of our personal identity, is of the lower category. Whether healthy or wounded it is still the acorn. Life does not truly begin until the acorn falls into the ground. For you see, we suffer from a serious case of mistaken identity. This lesser self is not who I am at all. My real self lives far more sadly within it, wrapped up in layers and layers of hardened shell.

The movement from the lesser to the greater self is generally regarded as a passage consciously and voluntarily undertaking. Theoretically, it's possible simply to wake up and see, and in fact, instances of spontaneous enlightenment occur on all spiritual traditions. But the journey toward full selfhood is more than just awakening. It involves a letting go that is also a dying. The acorn doesn't sprout right on the tree, It has to fall into the ground, and its shell must be cracked. This is perhaps the most challenging piece to our contemporary worldview. There's a sacrifice involved. The word sacrifice is from a Latin root that means "make holy "" or "make hole." We make wholeness by the sacrifice of the lesser self in the holocaust of our own becoming.

In the four Gospels Jesus has a lot to say about how we are to become an oak. In our Gospel readings over the last few weeks Jesus has been telling us what to do about money and possessions. He has told us about conflict. He has told us that the rules of a good life are not as black and white as we might hope. He has told us to manage our egos, especially if our needs for security, affection, or control are out of balance. And, this week we hear Jesus say that there are costs to being his disciple. There is a price to be paid in becoming an oak. He says that the cost may include the affection and support we get from our families, the security of our physical well-being, and the control we get from our money and possessions. Jesus says these things to us, but we have come up with a lot of reasons to ignore what Jesus says.

Now, if you were here last week, you heard me preach about three ways in which different people need to work on letting go of their false self or ego. And today, the costs of discipleship that Jesus tells us about, mirror those three ways that we heard about last week.

Jesus said, *"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."* Those of us with an elevated need for affection need to pay extra attention to this cost of being a disciple. To more fully grow into our true self, some of us need to work on letting go of our need for affection. This is not to say that affection is bad. It is actually necessary for healthy living, but too much of a need becomes a burden and a blockage. To be a better disciple of Jesus some of us need to dampen our need for affection and approval. Is this you or one of your loved ones?

And Jesus said, *"Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."* Those of you with an elevated need for security need to pay extra attention to this cost. To more fully grow into your true self, some of you need to work on letting go of your need for security. To be a better disciple of Jesus some of you need to dampen your fears. Is this you or one of your loved ones?

And Jesus said, "*None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*" Those of you with an elevated need for control need to pay extra attention to this cost. To more fully grow into your true self, some of you need to work on letting go of your possessions. To be a better disciple of Jesus some of you need to dampen the anger that can be associated with an excessive need to control. Is this you or your loved one?

Do you see the wisdom that Jesus has in understanding and naming our costs? When you let go of your very personal primary concern and accept your cost of being a disciple, then you can live into the fullness that God has already created in each and every one of us. When you sacrifice your acorn you can grow into a mighty oak.

My own personal cost of being a disciple is letting go of my excessive need for approval and affection. As a child, I think I got healthy affection from my family of origin, but from the age of twelve I was harboring a deep sense of shame associated with my sexual orientation. Every day I was living a life of deceit as I hid who I was. And, when you hid yourself, you damage your spiritual journey and hinder your relationship with God. You cannot become an oak by hiding. I have worked for many years to let go of that shame, and to let go of my excessive need for approval. Those of you that know me well, know that at times I still fail. I still sometimes go to that bad place, but I'm working on it.

My challenge to you is to identify and work on your primary cost as well. I know that many of you are already doing this. You know how freeing this work can be. You also know this is not a one-time cost, but it is the work of a lifetime. However, it is worth it. Being a disciple of Jesus has enormous benefits both in this life and in the next. Being a disciple of Jesus is our pathway to becoming an oak.

Now, I should clarify one thing before, I conclude today. Each of us has a primary cost to work on, but we each need to work on all three areas or costs. We all have ego work to do to let go of our false self. Jesus says, we all need to let go of an excessive need for affection and approval. Jesus says, we all need to let go of an excessive need for control and manage our related anger. And, Jesus says, we all need to let go of an disproportionate need for security and manage our fears. In this way the oak grows and flourishes.

We often talk of the cost of discipleship as if it were a hardship. At times, this may be the case, but the cost of being a disciple also leads to the freedom to be the person that God created us to be. We can be free of needs, free of anger, and free of fears. Don't you want this for yourself and for your loved ones. We each need to do this work for ourselves, but the world sorely needs us to do this as well.

Lest we be tempted to protest, like the acorns in my little fable, that this is “totally morbid,” I hope you can see that the act of dying to the outward form of our selfhood is what releases and makes visible the inner quality of a lightness. Put another way what the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the wise one calls a butterfly. Come and surrender your acorn. Pay the cost and join in the wonder of being Jesus’ disciple.