

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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April 2, 2021

Every time we read the Passion narrative, something different catches my attention. This year, it was the scene where Peter cut off Malchus's ear. Now, it wasn't the severed appendage that stood out. Rather, it was my shock that I had never realized how important those four sentences were to understanding Jesus's life and ministry.

You see, in that garden, Peter wanted to fight, but Jesus wanted to protect. And, moments before this exchange, Jesus prayed for the disciples and expressed his commitment to do no harm (John 17:11-12). Jesus named that his vision of equity, truth, and peace was hated by the world (John 17:14). Jesus prayed for the unity of all (John 17:23).

Then, Jesus took those words and brought them into action. As one author puts it, the Passion narrative unleashes the transformative power of Jesus's teaching. "It both modeled and consecrated the eye of the needle that each one of us must personally pass through in order to accomplish the 'one thing necessary' here, according to his teachings: [that is,] to die to self."¹

That's deep: the Passion unleashes the transformative power of Jesus's teaching, which is to die to oneself.

The world hates that idea.

We live by self-promotion.

¹ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind—a New Perspective on Christ and His Message* (Shambhala: 2008), 104, 105–106, 107.

We gain by thinking about me, myself, and I.

No matter how hard we want to resist it, we are selfish, self-centered, and too sickened to notice it. Lately, we've seen that sin of individualism rear its ugly head a lot.

You see, individualism reigns when we fail to acknowledge how our so-called personal choices around COVID become "life or death" for others.

Individualism takes the complex history of our country and whitewashes it so as to ignore the systems that were built to prefer white as the default.

Individualism is the straight person condemning LGBTQIA+ siblings.

Individualism is unbridled consumption that contributes to climate change.

Individualism is anti-Asian harm and antisemitic hate crimes.

Individualism is Pilate only looking to protect Roman interests, it's Caiaphas preserving only the Temple's interests, and it's the mob pursuing something regardless of the truth.

Jesus took a different path.

Jesus kept the group as his concern.

Jesus kept truth as his goal.

Jesus went to the extreme so as to reveal what dying to the self, for the good of the collective, literally looks like.

And, I want to be clear, tonight's Passion reading is NOT asking us to literally die. Jesus, who is the embodiment of God, can go to extremes—you and I should not. If you and I work to match God's extreme, then we are trying to become God, and that, my friends, that is idolatry. Rather, the Passion reminds us of the truth that we are selfish, and that we choose to ignore or

actively hurt the collective every day. At the same time, the Passion encourages us to imagine how we might take one step on Christ's pathway to "die to self." Not in a literal way, but in a way that open us up to the common good, to the collective life, to something beyond what the world will give. To something that, well, the new day will reveal...