

Good Friday Sermon
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St. John United Methodist Church
Anchorage, Alaska
David Beckett, D.Min.

If I were to sum up the spirituality of Jesus...if I were to capture the essence of how it is that God wants us to live...it would be two words: deny yourself. Some of our best moments in life happen when we set aside what we want to do, when we deny our own pleasure for the sake of others or a higher purpose. Think about parents who make sacrifices so their children can have a better life. Think about our police and firefighters who regularly put their lives on the line to protect their communities. Think about the soldier who dies on the battlefield while serving his or her country.

Jesus gave himself willingly to a horrific torture and death on a Roman cross. In this way he showed us not only how to die well, but how to live well. The secret is this. There is great power in denying your own pleasures. There is great strength when we give sacrificially. There is great peace when we know that this way of living can see beyond the discomfort or pain of the moment.

I want to tell you a remarkable true story about a man who understood this principle of living God's way. His name was Thomas Cannon, a postal worker in Richmond, Virginia. Thomas lived much of his life on the edge of poverty so that he could give to those in need. Describing himself as "a poor man's philanthropist," he gave away more than \$150,000 to people who were experiencing hard times, or who had been unusually kind or brave. He gave these gifts over the last 33 years of his life, mostly in \$1,000 checks.

He traced his inspiration to his time in the Navy. While he was away at signal school, there was a shipboard explosion at the Port of Chicago, and many of his shipmates were killed. He concluded that he was spared for a reason — to help others, to be a role model, to inspire people to see what he called "the oneness of it all."

Cannon gave to people of all ages, races, nationalities and incomes. He gave checks to a low-income woman who started a youth center in her apartment complex ... to a retired postal worker who was a regular volunteer at an elementary school ... to a woman and man who wanted to return to Vietnam to visit their hometown ... to an advocate for the victims of crime ... and to a teenager who had been abandoned as an infant, but grew up to be named Virginia's Youth of the Year.

This generosity did not come without sacrifice. Cannon supported his wife, his two sons, himself and his charitable efforts on a salary that never exceeded \$20,000 a year. When he retired from the postal service in 1983, he and his wife lived near the poverty line on his pension. "We lived simply," he said before his death in 2005, "so we could give money away."

He wasn't unhappy about these sacrifices. In fact, he had a great sense of humor, one that he maintained even after being diagnosed with terminal cancer. As his health was failing, he told the Richmond newspaper, "A Baptist deacon who owed me \$200 died recently. First thing I'm going to do when I get to the other side is run him down."

Thomas Cannon did not want a foundation to be set up to continue his work after his death. He feared that a foundation would require a bureaucracy, and tons of paperwork. He didn't even want his name attached to anything. He left just one simple request: "Help somebody."

Jesus often talked about death and the need spiritually to die to self. To become a follower of Jesus means to be willing to sacrifice ourselves for the good of all. It means to be willing to deny ourselves for the benefit of the larger human organism. It means, in the words of Thomas Cannon, to "help somebody."

What needs to die in you that others might be helped? Right now there are people in great need who will not be helped, who will not feel the love of God until you and I die to self. Jesus died on the cross so that others may have abundant life. It is Good Friday and we experience the darkness of death. But we are a people who see the bigger picture. We are a people who can look beyond this night. And this includes the hope during our moments of darkness. This includes the hope when the time has come for us to die.

Tonight is about allowing the reality of the crucifixion of Jesus to sink into our lives. May it also be a time for us to allow the principle of self-denial to sink into our thinking and transform how we live and act and love.