

Scary Words: Confession, Denial, and Surrender September 12, 2021

There is a delightful comedy film called *Galaxy Quest*, made in 1999, starring Sigourney Weaver and Tim Allen. The story focuses on a bunch of aging actors who starred in a science fiction series (that is strangely similar to Star Trek). These past-their-prime actors find themselves in a real-life intergalactic war between two different types of aliens. The good, peaceful, kind aliens enlist the actors' help to fight the evil, destructive, cruel aliens.

As these kind aliens explain the situations to the actors, they talk about the concept of "lying." Lying is a foreign notion to them that they've only learned from the evil aliens. The evil alien leader will promise them something (like peace or mercy), and then act in a way that goes against his promise (like attacking).

When the human actors hear this explanation, they kind of look around at each other and say, "Yeah... that's terrible." The concept of lying then goes on to play a key role in the film, but I won't spoil it for you.

Howard, David and Robert Gordon. *Galaxy Quest*. DVD. Directed by Dean Parisot. Universal City: Dreamworks, 1999.

Wouldn't that be something, if lying was unheard of? Imagine if every word that was spoken was true. Even more than that, imagine word spoken was kind and thoughtful, was a gift to those who hear it.

That seems to be the hope of James, in our reading. The tongue, James writes, can cause a lot of harm, even though it's such a small part of our physical body. It's like a rudder in a ship; our words can steer our actions. Our words can build up community and trust and value... or words can destroy those things. So be careful how you use your words. Are they kind and giving and truthful?

It's worth noting that in Biblical times, words did carry weight, more so than today. Today, we have to sign agreements to make them official (because words aren't enough). In Jesus' day, agreements were spoken and sworn with an oath (and sometimes sealed with blood).

Today, we have axioms like, "Talk is cheap," and "Actions speak louder than words," because we don't take much stock in words. There is often a disconnect between what someone says and what someone does. But for James and for the disciples of Jesus, there wasn't such a clear break. To speak something was to require action.

We see that with Peter. Our Gospel reading begins with Peter's proclamation. Jesus is checking in with his disciples about what people are saying. Who does everything think Jesus is. Only Peter gets it: "You are the Messiah."

We call this declaration "the confession of Peter." Today, we think of the word "confession" as admitting something that you don't want to speak. A confession of sins. You confess to your crimes. But the original use of that word "confession" meant "to declare your faith;" to profess. So Peter confesses his faith in Jesus as the Christ. Later, in the year 400, Augustine wrote a book we call "Confessions" about his faith.

So Peter has confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. Now, with words holding weight, Peter is held to something. He has to act in accordance with that confession. His decisions from here on out, his actions, his future must align with this truth, this statement of faith, that Jesus is the Son of God, who will save God's people.

The problem is that Peter has misunderstood the idea of a Messiah. For Peter and most faithful Jews at the time, the Messiah was foretold to be a military leader who would bring about God's kingdom by force. So when Jesus starts talking about how he will be betrayed and killed, Peter is puzzled, and in accordance with his confession that he just made, he takes Jesus aside to correct him. It's important that Peter is *acting in an admirable way*. He is following through on his profession of faith, helping Jesus to realize his role as the Messiah.

But Jesus has a different plan for the Messiahship. So he corrects Peter, and says, "Get behind me, Satan!" Your misconception of the Messiah is not from God and is in fact dangerous. So get behind me; or in other words, follow me. He's not saying, "Get out of my sight!" Jesus is telling Peter, "Watch and follow my lead." And then Jesus continues talking about the expectations for his followers: disown yourself, be willing to die, and listen to me.

At this point, now, Peter doesn't have much of a choice. He has acknowledged/confessed that Jesus is the Messiah; now Peter has to follow up his words with action, even though Jesus isn't the Messiah that Peter was expecting. Peter can't say, "You know what, you might be the Messiah, but I'm going to pretend like that doesn't matter; that doesn't affect my life." No, if Peter says (and believes) that Jesus is the Son of God, he must act on that statement. Words lead to action.

And there is a call for us. Every week, we come to church, and we confess our faith. We say the Nicene Creed, a statement of what we believe. The challenge is then to live our lives like we really believe that. We believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that Jesus showed us a way to live that is more life-giving than any other way of being. That way is to deny ourselves to follow him.

What does that mean? This is a piece, a caution really, from an Anglican priest and writer named Francis Dewar.

"The old lie about self-denial still keeps spooking around the psyches of many Christians. It says that Christianity is about squashing your feelings, doing your duty, and soldiering on regardless. It leads eventually to chronic exhaustion, cynicism, depression, or [substance abuse...]

"God calls you to discover your true self, that greater self that you could become. [...] To deny your self [...] may mean foregoing popularity or status or your good name or money or power or security. [...] In other words, it *will* mean denying the self that runs after or clings to these things: that part of our nature that we call our ego will need to be subdued and crushed—a painful process, very painful, but not a destructive one."

Francis Dewar, *Invitations* (London: SPCK, 1996), 29.

I think that's a helpful insight into Jesus' call to deny ourselves to follow him. It does mean serving others; it does mean giving up those parts of ourselves that we cling to that get in the way; it does mean practicing looking beyond ourselves. It does *not* mean ignoring our own needs and hopes and goals.

In a word, to deny ourselves means to surrender. To invite our loving God to help us let go of our hang-ups, and focus on loving.

It's a little bit ironic that I started off this sermon by talking about *Galaxy Quest*, because the tagline of the movie is "Never Give Up; Never Surrender!" We value standing firm and fighting, and it's a bit countercultural to value the act of surrender. But when the one we surrender to is God, we are free let go of the weight the world has put on us, and live as the people God created us to be.

Amen.

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