

04-14-19

Palm Sunday

“Selfie-Centered”

Philippians 2:11-15

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We live in a selfie world. Every day, around the globe, hundreds and hundreds of millions of selfies are taken. On Android phones alone, an average of 93 million selfie photos are taken daily. How many of you have taken a selfie in the past year? In the past week? In the past 24 hours? In the past hour?

I don't want to be an alarmist, but some experts are getting concerned about our selfie-centeredness. What used to be a fun photo technique has turned into, for some, an obsessive, constant seeking of online approval from others. What happens is simple: one takes selfie, one edits selfie, one posts selfie, one waits, and one repeatedly checks one's phone for feedback. And that social media feedback can make or break a person's day, can make or break a person's self-perception.

The American Psychiatric Association now labels the obsessive urge to take selfies a genuine psychological complex. They call it “selfitis.” That's a real thing.

And so is “selficide.” That term refers to a person who's killed while taking a selfie in a dangerous manner. Since 2011, more than 250 people around the world have died taking selfies. That's more than the number of people killed in shark attacks.

Selfies are very much a sign of the times. And the human race is quickly becoming more and more selfie-centered.

In a way, though, this is nothing new. Humans have always been self-centered. We've not always had camera phones, and multiple social media posting options. But human beings, from the very start, have been self-absorbed and self-concerned. God created human beings to live in harmony with each other, to live according to his will, and to serve as stewards of his creation. But sin causes all of us to live in disharmony with others, to reject God's agenda in favor of our own, and to take care of ourselves first.

Sin makes me self-centered. Sin makes me care more about me than I care about you. Sin causes me to focus more on my needs than the needs of others, to chase more after my desires than after God's will for my life.

Sin makes you self-centered, too, doesn't it? We may not all be selfie-obsessed. We may not all have "selfitis." But we sure do have "sinitis," don't we? We're all trapped, caught up, captive to sin. And there's nothing we can do about it.

But, thank the Lord, a Savior has come! Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, the holy One of Israel, the Ruler of the Universe, he has come to save us from our sin. He didn't come down from heaven with an army of angels. Jesus didn't come to dazzle us with his heavenly power and majesty. He didn't come to claim fame or grab glory.

Why did he come? Jesus came for us. He came with a clear mission and purpose. He came with a sacrificial spirit and a merciful heart. He came humbly. Jesus came to surrender his divine, holy life, as payment for our wretched sins.

We heard it in Philippians chapter 2 earlier: Christ Jesus "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he

humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

Our Lord Jesus was anything but self-centered. Jesus was sinner-centered.

He rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, not basking in the acclaim of the crowds, but laser-focused on his mission of sacrifice and salvation.

The people shouted praises. They showered him with love. They all “liked” Jesus on social media that day. But they were really only thinking of themselves. “Maybe this Jesus guy can heal us, can feed us, can do some more miracles for us. Maybe Jesus can even drive the Romans away for us!” They didn’t understand that Jesus had come to save their souls, to die for their sins.

Thank God Jesus came for selfie-centered people like the Palm Sunday crowd, and for sinners like you and me. This week we’ll hear the story of his Last Supper, his betrayal and arrest, his trial and condemnation. We’ll follow him to Calvary, we’ll stand at the foot of his cross, we’ll hear his final words. We’ll marvel at his selfless sacrifice, we’ll grieve his innocent death, and we’ll take to heart that it was all for us. It was all for sinners. It was all for the helpless, for the lost, for the selfie-centered.

Last month I watched as an old woman took a couple of selfies. I was in Puerto Rico for a weekend last month, to participate in a meeting with the Lutheran missionaries in Mayaguez. On Sunday afternoon, we traveled to Ponce, and had a worship service to install a brand-new missionary pastor. The church is a little room in a downtown storefront, and the tiny congregation is less than a year old.

I sat in a chair next to Mary. She's been a Lutheran for a few months now. She lives on the streets of Ponce, but has found a home in this little church community. During the worship service, I noticed Mary taking pictures of the pastors up front, pictures of the congregation around her, and pictures of herself. Then, at one point, she nudged me, handed me her phone, and motioned for me to look at her pictures.

I smiled at all the worship photos, but I wanted to cry when I looked at Mary's selfies. They showed eyes spilling tears, and a face carved with pain.

Just before the service started, I was told that Mary's son had been shot to death that week. She was grieving, distraught, brokenhearted. But she was in church, in the Lord's presence, in the Lord's embrace.

Mary didn't pay close attention to much of the liturgy or the sermon that day. But I noticed when we sang the Kyrie, the ancient liturgical prayer, Mary's head popped up. "Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy." Mary closed her eyes, and she sang those words from her soul.

In all her pain, Mary knew her need for Christ's mercy. And Christ, the ever-selfless Lord, gave it to her.

That's why Christ came. For Mary. For you. For me. "Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy." Amen.