

Sermon Title: **“Self-denial?”**

Bible: **Exodus 3:1-5, 7, 9-15 & Matthew 16:21-26**

When: on Sunday, September 3, 2023

Where: about 30 people (plus YouTube streaming viewers) at Gilroy UMC

Opening Prayer

O Lord, as you call us, we come to you. As your will is higher than our will, we follow you. Let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

1. At the Age of 80?

The first scripture reading from Exodus 3 is one of the most famous and the most miraculous moments in the Bible. God appeared to Moses through the burning bush. God called Moses to deliver God’s people from oppression. How old was Moses at that time? Moses was 80 years old. After Moses delivered the Israelites throughout the wilderness for 40 years, he died at the age of 120. These numbers are based on the biblical narrative. There might be different understandings of age, compared to our contemporary culture and situation.

As of now, the mandatory retirement age for the UMC clergy is 72. There are some retired but active pastors who still serve in churches, but 72 is the mandatory age to retire. Do you think that this mandatory retirement age 72 for the clergy is too early, too late, or the right

age to retire? How about God's calling to Moses at the age of 80? Is it too early, too late, or the right time to be called?

2. Erik Erikson and Moses

According to Erik Erikson, we are going through eight stages of psychosocial development. Our society and lives have changed a lot from time to time and from place to place. There is no absolute theory to apply for everyone, because everyone is different and unique. But we can learn something from his theory. Erikson believed that we continue to develop our personalities through the struggles at each stage in our lives. I will briefly share his theory. At the age of infancy, from birth to 1 year, we learn to trust from the love and care from our parents and caregivers. At the stage of early childhood, from 1 year to 3 years, we start to express what we want and what we do not want. We say No and Yes! At the stage of adolescence, usually in our teenage years, we go through our identity crisis. We wonder who we are and what we really want. At the stage of early adulthood, from 18 to 29 years, we look for close and committed relationships. At the stage of middle age, from 30 to 64 years, we work diligently, build our careers, and contribute to our society. As a part of a family or a community, we nurture our children or help the next generations. At the stage of old age, after 65 or retirement, we tend to look back on our lives. We can have feelings of achievement, fulfillment, regrets, or disappointments. Does this theory make sense to you?

According to this theory, even though Moses was 80 years old, he could be at the stage of middle age. He got married and took care of his father-in-law's flock. I do not think that he

was at the age of retirement. When God called Moses, Moses made many excuses to refuse God's calling. Was this self-denial? No. When God heard the crying of the people, God needed someone. God saw Moses' potential. God chose and called Moses. However, Moses worried about how others would respond to his own miraculous experience and his calling. God revealed the divine name and God confirmed God's calling to Moses. But after this Exodus 3, Moses did not stop making excuses. Moses worried about his leadership, ability, and skills. Through the staff that Moses had in his hand, God showed the power of God. When God calls us, God does not leave us alone. God will use what we have, and God will give us the opportunity to develop what we have. Moses made an excuse again. He said, "I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." When God calls us, God does not call us alone. God calls us together. God calls not only the pastors, but also the churches. For Moses, God called his brother Aaron who could speak fluently in public to work together with him as a team.

When God calls you, please do not deny God's calling. It is not self-denial. But please try to look at what you have and who is with you. When God called Moses, God used the staff that Moses already had, and God called his brother Aaron to be together with him. God will use what you have and who you are. God will provide you teammates to work together with.

3. Confucius and Peter

As I shared the theory of Erik Erikson, I would like to share a teaching of Confucius. Confucius was one of the most famous Chinese philosophers. He lived from 551 to 479 BCE. But his influence still remains not only in China but also in East Asia, including Korea.

Confucius once said, “When I was fifteen, I was determined in my studies. At thirty, I was self-established. At forty, I could no longer be confused nor tempted. At fifty, I understood my divine destiny. At sixty, I was undisturbed by anything I heard (ie, opposing views). At seventy, I could do whatever I wish and still stay within moral and ethical bounds.” I tried to find the best translation. There is about a 2500 year gap between Confucius and us. But we can still learn something. I am a little over 40. Unlike Confucius, I am still confused sometimes, and tempted many times. How about you? No confusion or no temptation any more? When I become 50, I hope to serve the church as a pastor, as God calls me. When I become 60, when I hear opposing views or opinions, I hope to have an open and gentle mind. When I become 70, I hope to be like him. Because I am a Christian, my version is like this: what I want is the same as what God wants. In other words, what God wants is the same as what I do.

I know that Peter was not 70 years old in today’s second scripture reading of the Gospel of Matthew. He might have been in his twenties. In the Gospels, Peter was the only disciple known to have been married. In Matthew 8, Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law. Even though Peter was not 70 years old, what he wanted was not what God wanted. Peter was rebuked by Jesus. This was right after Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus had blessed Peter and his confession. But here, Jesus rebuked Peter. Even Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Peter might think of Jesus more than anyone, because

Peter did not want to see Jesus' suffering and death, the way to the cross. But the cross was God's will. Even Jesus wanted to avoid the cross, but Jesus prayed to follow God's will.

When there is a difference between God's will and our will, can we follow God's will? It would be best if God's will and our will are the same. But we will encounter those moments when what God wants and what we want is different. Then, what is your choice? Do you want to follow God's will? Do you want to keep your own will? What is self-denial? When there is a conflict between what we want and what God wants, can we deny ourselves, and follow Jesus?

4. Communion & Joyful Obedience

When we have communion today, I hope for us to remember God's calling. God calls not only the pastors but also all of us, because we are all God's children. And God wants to use all of us for our church, our community, and our world. I know that it is not easy to say yes to God's calling, but please do not make excuses like Moses. Rather than making excuses, how about praying to help us to open our eyes to discover what we have, what potential we have, and with whom we can work together?

When we follow Jesus, what God wants might be different from what we want. In that case, can we choose what God wants? Can we follow God's will, not our will? Can we deny what we want and ourselves? I pray that what we want and what we do becomes what God wants and what God does. Then, it is not only self-denial but also joyful obedience. May God's joy and our joy come through our self-denial and obedience.

Closing Prayer

O Lord, it is not easy to deny ourselves, and take up our cross. But we want to follow you. That's because you call us and you want to use us. Please guide us for joyful obedience! In Jesus' name. Amen.