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“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” (Mark 8:34).

*Jas 2:14-24, 26; Mark 8:34 – 9:1*

We are reminded of just how Middle Eastern Jesus was by the paradox in today’s Gospel. Unlike the Western mind that neatly defines by logically excluding what something is not, Jesus combines opposites in dynamic tension to convey the Asian notion of mystery. “Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”

Trying to convince the average American that the path to fulfillment is self-denial, or that absence is presence and that to be first we must be last, is like asking them to “hear the sound of one hand clapping,” Unlike Greek philosophy, Asian thought asks the mind to hold contradictory ideas in open-ended fashion until they reveal a third way or a more intuitive understanding of just how complex reality is beyond our language.

The mystery of the cross is that those who empty themselves of self-interest, egocentric ambition and the primacy of personal survival expand their lives into the community, find their true identity in relationships and gain the ultimate freedom to lay down their lives out of love for others. Jesus took up his cross in order to empty himself totally into his followers. His *kenosis*, or self-emptying, reflected perfectly the *kenosis* of God, whose self-giving love created the world, then redeemed it from sin and death, which are the result of separating ourselves from God’s love in order to possess ourselves for ourselves.

Like long-distance runners, our goal is to come in on empty, to give our all to complete our mission as part of the team. Even a single day of service teaches us the joy of coming home tired but filled with satisfaction at having helped others or to advance a cause bigger than ourselves. We find ourselves by losing ourselves in a community of purpose. Jesus was preparing his disciples and the crowds to grasp the paradox of the cross and the mystery of self-sacrificing love, not as a warning of the suffering to come, but as the way to joy.

When we say yes to Jesus, we are agreeing to follow him on what may seem a long and winding road, uphill and into deep valleys, but we are at the crossroads of life and death, and we are choosing life.

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