

A movie titled Selma came out in 2014.

For those of you who haven't seen it, it's about the voting rights marches in 1965 that went from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.

They were lead by Rev. Dr. King, John Lewis, and other civil rights leaders.

In this movie, the artists Common and John Legend perform a song called Glory.

I am going to read some of the lyrics and I want you to listen for the references to Jesus:

The movement is a rhythm to us
Freedom is like religion to us
Justice is juxtaposition in' us
Justice for all just ain't specific enough
One son died, his spirit is revisitin' us

Selma's now for every man, woman and child
Even Jesus got his crown in front of a crowd
They marched with the torch, we gon' run with it now
Never look back, we done gone hundreds of miles
From dark roads he rose, to become a hero
Facin' the league of justice, his power was the people
Enemy is lethal, a king became regal
Saw the face of Jim Crow under a bald eagle
The biggest weapon is to stay peaceful
We sing, our music is the cuts that we bleed through
Somewhere in the dream we had an epiphany

Now we right the wrongs in history
No one can win the war individually
It takes the wisdom of the elders and young people's energy
Welcome to the story we call victory
The comin' of the Lord, my eyes have seen the glory
One day when the glory comes
It will be ours, it will be ours

I tell you about this song because it's one of many examples of people of color leaning on their faith in God to give them the strength to fight the good fight.

They knew they couldn't go it alone.

They needed each other, you can't have a march with one person.

And they needed God, who gave them the courage to march for their rights in such dangerous, hostile territory.

And they needed Jesus who inspired them to stand up for what they believed in and to do it peacefully, even if they knew it might cost them their lives or their freedom.

They knew they couldn't challenge the laws and the racist practices of the most powerful country on earth without the triad of each other, God and Jesus.

In today's text, Jesus tells his disciples one of his most famous lines, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." (Mark 8: 35)

Here are the people who are trying to save their own lives:

Those who are trying to go it alone, who believe they can succeed and survive on their own,

those who turn their backs on others to save their own skin,

the people who are so stubborn who won't ask for or receive help,

those who decry God because one time things didn't turn out the way they wanted them to,

and so now they believe God abandoned them and they're convinced they don't need to place their faith and trust in God,

these people are all trying to save their lives on their own.

Here's what it looks like to lose one's life:

Being willing to lean on God and on one's community for support, putting the well-being of the world above your own individual needs,

realizing that we were blessed with these lives for a greater purpose, that we might use them to serve the world.

The people marching from Selma who were willing to risk jobs, relationships, and freedom because they knew they were part of something bigger than themselves or their families.

People who make personal sacrifices to help others.

These people are willing to lose their lives, and in the end, they'll be saved.

Losing one's life means being willing to let go of the myth of self-sustenance.

Jesus calls us to let go of our egos.

Let go of our perceived independence.

Let go of our fortunes and accolades for the sake of the world.

We think we are defined by our jobs, our families, our ethnic origins.

But Jesus tells us that we need to live into a new kind of identity, not one conveyed by our last names, but by our religion.

John Calvin, the famous theologian, said that self-denial is the sum of the Christian life.

Now, self-denial sounds worse than it is.

It's not primarily about squashing our desires or delaying gratification, but about embracing new understandings of identity.

You see, a person in Jesus' culture was defined by those to whom they belonged -- usually household or kin.

But when disciples joined a community defined by association with Jesus; they entered a new family comprising all of Jesus' followers.

Self-denial is not self-annihilation, but complete redefinition.

They were no longer of the house of so-and-so, but of the Jesus-following community.

We are not solely of our nuclear blood and DNA families, but of the family of Jesus Christ, in relationship with all those other people who know themselves to be Christians.

When we think of ourselves in this way, we realize that we can't go it alone.

We can't have healthy, fulfilling lives if we only exist for ourselves.

We need the love, support and challenge that being in relationship with God and other Christians offers us.

And, other people in this community need you.

It's reciprocal.

If you are willing to lose your independent self-sufficient life, you'll gain a whole new life, one in which you are nurtured by others, and are given the chance to nurture others.

In gaining this new life, we also find new ways of living for the greater good.

We live and die not only for ourselves but for the betterment of humanity.

Now, you might be thinking to yourself that this is just unreasonable.

You have your job, your pension or 401(k), you have your small safety net, your kids' college fund, your house, your car, your health insurance.

You have all you need to take care of yourself and your family, thank you very much.

That's great, until it isn't.

You have those things while you have a job.

But what if you get laid off and can't find more work?

What if you or a family member gets sick and the medical bills pile up?

What if a family member succumbs to addiction or debilitating depression?

What if your spouse up and leaves you and suddenly you're left to provide for the family on your income alone?

What if you suddenly learn that you have to financially support your elderly parents or your in-laws, and now your money is really stretched?

I promise I am not trying to earn the prize of most pessimistic preacher ever, but my point is that stuff happens.

Life goes according to our plans, until it doesn't, and then what?

Being self-sufficient and independent works well and good until the floor falls out beneath you.

The truth is that it will, eventually, in some way or another.

That's life.

That's why we have to place our trust not in human-made institutions, but in God, and in this community that gathers each week in the name of God.

Your community will be there to help you in emotional, spiritual and financial ways when your perfectly constructed world falls apart.

We, your community, and your trust in God, will be the safety net for you.

The people who marched from Selma to Montgomery didn't have the luxury of being self-sufficient because they lived under Jim Crow laws in the American south.

They knew they needed one another and God to carry them through.

If you don't feel the need to advocate for your rights, consider yourself lucky.

But someone else, who is oppressed, might need you to speak out, to advocate for them.

So even if you're doing well and you're successful, you're also a Christian, and as such, you're held to a higher standard.

Each of us Christians has the responsibility to live for the betterment of the world.

As 1 Corinthians says, “when one member suffers, all suffer” (12:26).

If living in isolated comfort is your way of trying to save your life, and you will lose it.

Eventually.

And there will be no one there to help you gain it back.

But if you are willing to use your life to help your fellow brothers and sisters and siblings of this world, to give platform to the unheard and cast light on those who are unseen,

if you are willing to give up your comforts and live in the service of others, you are willing to lose your life.

You will gain new life, one that is more abundant, more meaningful, and more intimate, through Christ, who makes us one. Amen.