

Imagine yourself 10 pounds thinner. With no credit card debt. And an ability to speak a foreign language. As you picture it, keep in mind that Your *current self* — the person you are right here, right now — cannot achieve these goals. But your *future self* can do it. So why not put your future self in charge?

A behavioral economist named Katherine Milkman from the University of Pennsylvania is very interested in how our daily decisions are affected by whether our current self or future self is making the decisions. Now, that is not to say that any of us can hop into a time machine and jump into the future. But we *can* decide to make choices or decisions with a focus on the current day ... or a future day.

For example, Milkman has explored how people buy groceries online. Specifically, she has looked at what people order when they buy for next-day delivery, compared with what they order for delivery three days in advance. What she learned is that the current self buys for next-day delivery. While the future self buys for three days in the future.

And what has she found in relation to this? People spend much more money when they buy for immediate consumption, and they tend to purchase less nutritious food. “If you buy for a rush delivery,” says Milkman to *Psychology Today*, “you buy junk.” Yes, it’s true. Your current self buys Twinkies and potato chips. After all, they taste great — right now!

Your future self, on the other hand, buys whole grains and raw vegetables. After all, when you make a plan to eat better in the future, you tend to buy food that will support a nutritious diet. Your future self is much more rational and restrained than your current self. Your future self wants to benefit from a balanced diet, while your current self will eat anything that tastes delicious. Your future self wants to have zero credit card debt, but your current self craves a new flatscreen 75” television. Your future self wants to learn a foreign language, while your current self gets bored after 15 minutes of an instructional program.

Ok...so, what can you do? Why not *put your future self in charge*? Make a grocery list and stick to it. Pay down your debt each and every month. Spend 30 minutes a day on studying a language — no exceptions! “The more certain the future is,” says *Psychology Today*, “the more power it has.” So, make the future certain. Give it power in your life. Put your future self in charge of your current, daily decisions!

One might say that Jesus had an amazing ability to make choices from the perspective of his future self. When he was traveling toward Jerusalem, some Pharisees said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you!” These Pharisees may have wanted to help Jesus, or they may have wanted to hurt him. It’s hard to tell. But regardless of their motivation, they are speaking to his current self. “Get away from here” — *now!* “Herod wants to kill you” — *today!*

I’m willing to bet that most of us would panic if we heard such a message. We would drop everything and run for our lives. But Jesus put his future self in charge. “Go and tell that fox for me,” he says, “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.” Jesus has an agenda for what he is doing: Today and tomorrow, cast out demons and perform cures; in three days, finish his work. Jesus has put his future self in control, not Herod.

Our Savoir moves forward because he knows that *his* future has to align with *God’s* future. “I must be on my way,” he says to the Pharisees, “because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.” Jerusalem is a holy city, the site of Israel’s temple, but it is also a city with a history of violence toward prophets: Uriah and Zechariah were both killed there, and maybe even Isaiah. Jesus knew that he would die in Jerusalem, just as his follower Stephen would be stoned there.

Soon after Peter made the bold statement that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus told him and the other disciples that he must “undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” For Jesus, the future self was always in control. Remember, the more certain the future is, the more power it has. Jesus knew that he *must* suffer and be killed, and on the third day be raised. This made his future powerful.

Notice that, after stating his intention to travel to Jerusalem, Jesus offers a lament over the city, a passionate expression of sorrow. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” he cries out. “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” Jesus knew that he would be killed in Jerusalem, but this horrible fate did not mean that he hated its’ people. Instead, he desired to show them motherly love and protection, along the lines of a hen sheltering her chicks in a time of danger.

Jesus showed the Israelites the compassion that a mother has for her child, but the people turned away from him. And as a result, they would have to face the consequences of their choices. Then he predicted that they would not see him until Palm Sunday, when a multitude of His followers would say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Every step of the way, Jesus was focused on God’s work in the future. On good days and bad, this orientation gave him great power. So, what is the message of this passage for us this morning, as we make our way through the season of Lent? What would it mean for us to put our future selves in charge, as individuals and as a congregation? More than anything else, we need to live each day with a focus on crucifixion and resurrection, just as Jesus did.

We keep crucifixion in our future by remembering that Jesus said, “No one has a greater love than this, than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Keeping

the cross in front of us means that we focus on service to our neighbors, following a Lord who said that he “came not to be served but to serve.”

The American writer Jay Parini says that “Jesus never meant to found a formal church with rituals and organized practices, to ordain priests, or to issue dogmatic statements that formed a rigid program for salvation. Other than ‘follow me,’ his only commandment was ‘to love one another as I have loved you.’”

You see, when we follow Jesus, we keep crucifixion in our future. When we love one another, we practice the same kind of self-giving love that Jesus demonstrated when he died for us. The cross shows us just how far Jesus was willing to go to show us how much he loves us.

As individuals, we move toward the cross when we love each other with a Christ-like love. As a congregation, we focus on crucifixion when we measure our success in terms of feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, healing the sick, visiting prisoners, and welcoming strangers. With the cross in our future, we are filled with great power. But the crucifixion is not the end of the story. Jesus moved from the cross to an empty tomb, from death to resurrection, and so can we.

The path to the empty tomb is a journey to new life. When our future self is focused on resurrection, it is open to transformation. Jesus “wished for us to experience a change of heart ...” says Parini, “... a shift into a larger consciousness, a life-enhancing awareness of the mind of God.” When we keep the empty tomb in our future, we expect to be changed.

This means becoming people who can forgive others because we have been forgiven by God. People who can welcome strangers because we have been welcomed by Christ. People who can act boldly because we have been filled with the power of the Spirit of God. With a focus on resurrection, we know that nothing in all creation, not even death itself, “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

For most of us, a focus on the present day keeps us trapped in our fears, suspicions, and resentments. But a focus on the day of resurrection? That opens up new possibilities for us. As individuals, we can forgive, welcome, and act in ways that we never thought possible. And as a congregation, we can put aside our institutional worries and boldly share the grace, love, healing, and hope of Jesus Christ.

The ministry of Jesus reminds us that if we put too much focus on our current self, we hurt ourselves and our church. But what if we put our future self in charge, focusing on crucifixion and resurrection? Then we can love one another with sacrificial love, and experience new life. And in this season of Lent, let's keep our focus on a future that matters to Jesus, our Lord, Our Savior, our Redeemer, and Friend. Amen.