

Life's Best: Center

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Third Sunday after Pentecost  
The Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time  
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1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Colossians 1:9-18; Mark 4:26-34

Text: [I]n him, all things hold together." -- Colossians 1:17

Some years ago, a friend and I spent a weekend in Paris. Let me dispel whatever notions of romance may have just flitted into your minds, because our traveling companion was her seven-year-old son. A sweet little boy at the time and a fine young man about to go off to college now, he was at the time of our trip in a critical phase of development some psychologists call distantiation. He was enough of a little boy still to want to climb into his mother's lap from time to time, and yet he was also aware that he was growing up into someone other than his mother's child. He was growing up into a man, different from a woman, and that growing awareness in little boys always involves a certain amount of push-pull between mothers and sons. And so there was during our weekend.

If Mom said it was time to go to bed, Son wanted to stay up a little longer. If Mom suggested dinner, Son wasn't hungry. If Mom wanted to visit a park, Son wanted to visit with the street vendors. And so on and so forth. All very typical, but a considerable amount of work on Mom's part just the same, and just when Mom felt that Son was dancing on her last nerve, he would become her sweet child again and the anger would dissipate.

That push-pull period of identity formation is crucial for all of us. Sometimes it lasts a few months or years, sometimes it lasts decades; but whether it's short or long, we all have to go through it – that is, if we're going to have our own identities. If we're going to become psychologically and coherently whole people. Mature identities aren't given to us; they have to be forged, and while nature plays its role, nurture plays the larger role, and if that nurturing process goes badly, personality disorders are often the result.

I think of this harsh fact of life when I hear the arguments against gay and lesbian people establishing families. Two mommies or two daddies is no way to bring up children, the opposition says, they'll be messed up. But when I read in the paper about lying, cheating politicians, or another husband who's gone on a shooting rampage, or a crook who bilks millions from veterans or the elderly, I wonder how different these people might have turned out if they'd been raised by two mommies or two daddies who made sure they developed a proper sense of empathy, who helped them see the beauty in difference, and who nurtured in their hearts a sense of abundance and security rather than a desperate sense of need.

There are many ways to be a self and many of them are bad. A self that senses it never has enough. A self that feels cut off from the world. A self that has no center, no core, no identity – these are the selves most vulnerable to tragedy.

This is the third in a series of sermons about life's best practices. Two weeks ago, I

spoke about the practice of living abundantly, a possibility made real in Jesus the Christ. Last week, I spoke about living connected to others, to God, and to the world around us, when we take seriously our calling to God's ministry of reconciliation.

Today, I want to ask you who you think and feel and recognize yourself to be. I would ask you, as they say in the London Underground, to "mind the gap" between your real self and the various false selves that we receive from the world and construct for ourselves. The hardest thing we ever have to do in life is become ourselves, our true selves, as God creates and intends us to be. As one teacher of pastoral counseling as put it, self-realization is harder than self-sacrifice, and the church, I'm sad to say, has much responsibility to bear for emphasizing the latter at the expense of the former.

And here's the reason self-realization is important, and here's the evidence of how hard it is to do. They're the words of Jesus, quoting the book of Leviticus: "And you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself." Some wit heard someone quote those words once and replied, "Yes, and that's why we treat each other so badly."

The fact of the matter is, in our deeply disturbed culture of self-indulgence, self-pity, and self-absorption, many of us have extremely poorly developed senses of self. It's ironic, but I think it's true. The more our culture encourages us in self-indulgence, the less capable we become of self-realization. And since we know how crucial early childhood development is, developing children with proper senses of themselves places a tremendous burden of responsibility on parents.

And the reason self-indulgence undermines self-realization is very simple. The movement of self-indulgence is inward, while the movement of self-realization is outward. We become ourselves when we move out from the self toward the world. As the saying goes in Judaism, You are what you do. But without an authentic self as a base of operations, we can get no traction, no movement, no growth, no maturation. And the result is a smothering of the self under the one-way movement of self-indulgence; everything moves toward the self, the ego's appetite becomes voracious, and the other components necessary for the development of a healthy personality are crushed or stunted. And the result is a culture made up largely of the walking wounded who, sadly, often wound others, sometimes grievously.

This is the pernicious cycle of psychological consumerism that underlies the material consumerism that has wreaked such havoc on the environment, the global economy, and our personal lives. When a person tries to live without a psychologically-, emotionally-, and spiritually-centered self, there is a bottomless pit into which a staggering array is dumped in the hopes of plugging that hole and piecing together that center – sex, money, work, relationships, toys, drugs.

And it never really works. Oh, it partially works, to be sure, and we tell one another that since we're all a little messed up, we shouldn't worry that some of us are more messed up than others. We're okay being not okay.

But this, it seems to me, is a counsel of despair. It is to accept the pitifully compromised as the best there is. It is to ignore the promise that Jesus made us when he said that he came that we might have life and have it abundantly. I take that promise seriously because I know it to be true.

When I was a teenager, I was baptized as all Baptist teenagers are. Baptists don't believe in baptizing babies; they believe in adult baptism after a profession of faith. I made such a profession, as I was expected to do at twelve or thirteen or fourteen, and I underwent the rite of Christian initiation called baptism, and I realized, pretty much immediately, that very little in my life had change. I came up out of the water pretty much as I went in. I was still the same old me. I was still the rather lonely, rather confused, rather marginalized teenager who had hoped that full acceptance into the body

of Christ would somehow make life different for me, and by and large it didn't.

And so for the next several years, I struggled, as many young adults do, to find a reason to stay attached to the church. By God's great mercy, I stayed in the church long enough to hear a sermon in which the preacher said that Christianity insists on the historicity of its basic tenets so that no one can take your salvation from you. Christianity isn't the story of a nice man named Jesus; Christianity is the story of the redemption of the world by God through a human being named Jesus. Christianity isn't a story about nice; it's a story about salvation. The Christian story isn't little; it's big. The story of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection – and the great story of the people of Israel that is its context – that story is grounded in history so that you can accept that God has done this marvelous thing called salvation for you, and that all you have to do – indeed, can do, is accept it or not. You can't undo it because it's a done deal. Nor can you hope for it as something waiting for you in the future. God's work of redemption, Christianity teaches, has already been done, and no one can deny that reality to anyone who wishes to accept that redemption for herself or himself.

When I realized, as a college student, that I'd grown up believing that I had to get myself right with God in order to be saved, and that this way of understanding the Christian faith is fundamentally wrong, everything changed. Life suddenly had a center for me that it did not have before. The barriers to my living a life filled with abundance and possibility came down. The door to my gilded cage as a white, privileged, north American male sprang open, and I was free – free to be the person God created and intended me to be. That was the moment, years after I'd accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior, and years after I'd been baptized into the church, that I truly became a Christian.

The text for this sermon is from the letter to the Colossians, perhaps written by Paul, but probably written by one of his followers in his name, and it doesn't matter which: “[I]n him” – that is, in Jesus the Christ – “all things hold together.”

You can try years of therapy – I did – you can try mood-altering drugs – lots of people do – and you can try throwing yourself into work or volunteering or being the world's best soccer mom. Or you can medicate yourself with electronics or chemicals or sports or gambling or one romantic partner after another. They'll all work for a while.

But sooner or later, for people who are honest about themselves and the world, the moment comes when they realize there has to be more to life than simply holding it together. And there is. I promise you there is.

The pieces of your life and your world will come together when you accept for yourself that God has already accepted you. God has accepted all those pieces – the beautiful ones and the ugly ones, the smooth ones and the ones with jagged edges, the ones that have been so beneficial to others and the ones that have hurt and maimed – God has accepted them all in accepting you. How do we know that we have been accepted? Because the invitation has come from Jesus the Christ, the one in whom all things – including us – hold together.

My prayer for you, my dear friends, is not that you will feel that the task of your life is to hold it together, but rather that you will let your life be held together by the one in whom all things cohere. Let that one, Jesus the Christ, be the center, and see what a difference it can make.

Let us pray. Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee. Amen.