

The Gift of Self

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Micah 6:3-8; Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 8:22-39

“Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.” -- Luke 8:35

Those of you who were here last week will recall that I spoke about the reality of God and the reality of Satan. This morning I would like to speak about a third important reality, the reality of the self.

Now I know that some of you might be thinking already, Why would he want to speak about something as obvious as that? A preacher might need to make a case for God and a preacher might need to make an even tougher case for the devil, but for the self? Isn't the self rather obvious? Isn't that the part we all know a great deal about already?

Perhaps, but if you've listened to me preach for any length of time, you know that I have relatively few kind words for the self. I have often pitted, in my sermons, living for the self as the real obstacle to living for God, and I've said to you often before that I believe it is a false luxury to think that evil is the greater problem most of us face most of the time; the greater problem for most of us is not serving the devil, it's serving the self, that voracious pit of desires, longings, appetites, fears, aspirations, hopes, passions, and confusions.

Freud dissected the self into a kind of psychological trinity he called the id, the ego, and the superego, and he parceled out our various drives and functions to the persons of that trinity who were in perpetual competition with one another throughout our lives. That was Freud's version of what Paul wrote about in the seventh chapter of Romans, “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” Paul was at war, he says, with himself, specifically with the sin that seemed to control his body – those appetites and desires and passions I mentioned earlier – and he believed that it was God, working through Jesus Christ, who had finally delivered him from that battle.

Now let's pause long enough at this point to recognize that this dichotomy that Paul has set up – mind good, flesh bad – has had terrible consequences in the history of Christianity. This has been one of the main streams of thought that has contributed to our view of creation as fallen and wild and untamed and in need of our mastery. We know the environmental disasters that kind of thinking has led to, but even on the personal level, many people have grown up with terrible images of themselves because they believed that what they thought was good and what they physically felt was bad, and I don't think we've entirely eradicated this way of thinking even today, even after the heroic efforts of St. Augustine to correct Paul's line of thought by locating the source of sin not in the body but in the will. People often forget that Augustine said that it is the

will that controls the members, not the other way around, and our unruly passions come not from our body parts but rather from our corrupted wills. And it is the will that is the heart of the self. As our Jewish ancestors have long observed, you are what you do, and what you do is what you wish, at some level, to do. And that combination of willing and doing is what makes up the self.

And given the mess human beings always seem to have found themselves in, you can perhaps appreciate why I hammer the self pretty hard. We live in a world that has always catered to the self, and the culture we have created for ourselves today has taken self-indulgence to a whole new level.

My this, my that, my everything. We have created a culture aimed at satisfying the desires of grown people who are acting increasingly like two-year-olds. A mother once told me that the thought process of a typical two-year-old is, What's mine is mine and what's yours is mine. A two-year-old is unbridled selfishness, and the my-thisness and my-thatness of technology and material prosperity has helped feed a cultural regression toward two-year-oldness.

We have become petulant, shallow, paranoid, and schizophrenic, and that's on a good day. We continue to dose ourselves with the spiritual, mental, and social poisons of guns for everyone, make the rich richer, and drill, baby, drill. If I've got mine, to hell with the rest of you, and I'm going to do everything I can to make sure that nothing in government or anywhere else stands in the way of my getting mine.

That's the American dream turned into the nightmare on Main Street, and it's the unspoken sentiment I see running American culture today. And at the heart of that rampant selfishness is the self.

So you can, I hope, appreciate why I haven't had much good to say in my preaching about the self.

Except. Except for what I see in today's reading from Luke. That wonderful story about Jesus's healing of the Gerasene demoniac. A man possessed by demons gets his self back when Jesus heals him: "[W]hen they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind."

The man was back. The man, whose name his neighbors doubtless knew but which has been lost to us, was back. He was his old self. He had received from God through the healing touch of Jesus Christ the greatest gift any of us ever receives: the gift of ourselves. The selves we were created to be by a loving and creative God.

When Genesis tells us that we humans, unique among earth's creatures, are created in the "image of God," it means that we are shadows – that's what the Hebrew word translated "image" means at its root – shadows of a creator who has just made a wonderful creation out of pure love. Just because, as Frankie Yankovic might put it. God's creation of the world was completely gratuitous – it was and is an act of pure, unselfish love that brought and continues to bring wonderful things into being. That's the God in whose image we are created, and when we are truly ourselves, that's who we are.

My friends, as I leave you for a little while, I hope you will remember that God's greatest gift to you is not your children or your spouse; it's not your education or your career; it's not your neighborhood or your home. It's your self. That unique, irreplaceable, mysterious self that is God's image and likeness. That self that loves and creates gratuitously -- with no strings attached and with no expectation of anything in return. The self that loves and brings wonderful things into being all the time, everywhere, no exceptions.

That is what healing is and that is what we see Jesus doing throughout the gospels: giving people back themselves. Sight is a wonderful thing, hearing is a wonderful thing, speech is a wonderful thing. But more wonderful still is the heart and the mind and the

will – the self, in other words – in whose service sight and hearing and speech can do wonderful things for God.

My prayer for you, as it always is, is that you will allow yourselves, more and more, to be shaped by the Holy Spirit into the selves God created you to be. Engage the struggle to free yourselves from the binding chains of the little, demonic selves that hold back, that distort, that frighten, that close off and shut down. Those are false selves, one and all, and their name is Legion.

The true self is the image of God you bear in this world, and that is the self I urge you to find, to cultivate, and to share. For the world's sake, for God's sake, and for yours.

I'll see you in September.