

Title: A Case of Mistaken Identity

Text: Philippians 3: 4b - 14

Date: October 8, 2017

As we continue our lectionary reading, still in Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, it occurred to me that I am still getting to know you, and I am wondering if any of you have a mental block against Paul. Do you have a clear memory of something he said you didn't like? If that describes you, believe me, you have my sympathies. I wonder, however, if this might be an invitation to reflect on how we read the scriptures in the first place. We touched on this in the Marcus Borg Adult Education class last week, and again this week. I believe it was Brian McLaren who said that many people make the mistake of reading the Bible as though it were a constitution, when it is better to view the Bible as a library where we can read of the collected experiences of our ancestors in the faith.

There is no question that Paul had a minimum of a couple of powerful spiritual experiences in his life. So without getting your guard up over what you agree and disagree with, can we read his letters as a library contribution, in part, as his way of processing his encounters with the Christ? (BTW, did you hear me say "the Christ" and not "Jesus"?)

Using some modern language, the passage we read today is a testimony to his whole ego structure being blown out of the water. A profound spiritual reality messed with all that he thought he was.

Paul starts off by reminding the reader of his impressive credentials. The Message translation reads: **"You know my pedigree: a legitimate birth, circumcised on the eighth day; an Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin; a strict and devout adherent to God's law; a fiery defender of the purity of my religion, even to the point of persecuting the church; a meticulous observer of everything set down in God's law Book."**

On some level, I think many of us can relate. While we may not be "in your face" about it, we smile inwardly when we reflect on our pedigree. So then it is quite a dramatic reversal when Paul concludes by saying, **"Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ."** (3:7)

On my first Sunday here I made some veiled reference to distinguishing between the True Self and the false self. To be clear, I have been greatly informed by the way Richard Rohr discusses this.

Simply put, your True Self is *who you are in God's eyes*. Your false self is *who you think you are*, and *who you want others to think you are*. It is your resume. It is not that it is inaccurate. It is just *not* who you are in God's eyes. It is the *persona* we adopt.

At one point Paul – actually Saul – was very attached to his persona. He was proud of his bloodlines. He was proud of the attention he brought to the details of the Law. He had a passion for purity that ultimately expressed itself in zealously persecuting the

church. We call this his False Self *not* because they were inaccurate statements, but because *it wasn't his deepest identity in God's eyes.*

When Paul says, **"Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ."** (3:7) it sounds so easy. In reality, however, separating ourselves from our false self is not easy at all.

Since my wife was not able to join me today, I thought this might be a fun time to talk about her. So let me tell you a little bit about her story.

My wife had a very strong identity in Thailand. She was strong in the world of academia, and was well known through her work at Payap University in Chiang Mai. She had two masters degrees and a Ph.D. At one point she was Vice President of Academic Affairs. More particularly, she was strong in the realm of communications. She founded the Communications Arts department at Payap. At one point she was also Director of the Christian Communications Institute of Thailand for a couple of years. In her younger years she had her own radio program, and for a few years before leaving Thailand she had her own T.V. program. She was much in demand as a public speaker. I've been in large auditoriums with a rustling, distracted crowd, that suddenly became quiet when she began speaking. She was confident, and had the deep satisfaction of feeling like she was making a difference. None of this was bad. She did a tremendous amount of good. Yet, to use Richard Rohr's vocabulary, this was *her false self*. It described *who she thought she was*.

This was all tested when we came to the United States. We naively thought it would be easy for her to get a job in a university, but that didn't prove to be the case. As many of you know, competition is stiff, and it seemed her English skills and her computer skills were not as strong as many would like. Ultimately, the one thing she discovered she could do with staying power was work in a preschool environment, where she has worked both as a teacher, and as an assistant director. Currently she works with toddlers.

I hope it is not too much of a stretch to recognize what a difficult transition this was for her... going from being in high demand as a public speaker, to changing diapers. Going from being highly respected, to having a teacher's aide talk back to you. It can be depressing. It is fertile ground for an identity crisis. Who am I... really?

The worst years are behind us, but this has been fodder for deep discussions as together we are trying to go deeper into an understanding of our True Self. As Richard Rohr would say, it is an opportunity for *Falling Upward!* As we strive to understand our True Self better, we long to come face to face with a Self that is deeply loved apart from any sense of achievement or worldly acclaim. This is what Paul discovered, and this is what my wife is in the process of discovering.

I share her story partially because it is extreme, thereby making it easier to see what we are dealing with. And I also share her story to let you know that I do not have a Pollyannaish notion of how easy this is to let go of the false self! It has quite a grip on us. And I should say as a footnote, that variations of her story are very common

amongst those who have moved here from other countries. May we all be more sensitive!

As extreme as this illustration is, these are challenges that we *all* deal with. I overheard a conversation once where a woman was talking about her mother who was nearing the end of her life. She was relaying how her mother wanted to make sure that people at her memorial service not only knew that she had a master's degree, but also that she had graduated at the top of her class. And my thought was, "*Really? She is near the end of her life and things like that are still important to her?*" This strikes me as deeply sad. There is nothing evil about the false self, but the more that false self still shapes us, the harder it will ever be to live into and celebrate our True Self.

Kathleen Dowling Singh lectures widely on spirituality at the end of life. In her groundbreaking book, *The Grace of Dying* she writes that in this final stage **"Letting go is not a choice. None of the transformations of the dying process are a choice... Imagine if you will, water rushing toward a drain."**

Richard Rohr writes, **"The final surrender of our False Self in the last months, weeks, days, and hours in any conscious dying might well be called 'enlightenment at gunpoint.'" Elsewhere he writes, "When 'this body' is all you think you are, no wonder you are afraid of dying. It is all you know and have – if you have not discovered your soul, that is. The False Self is terrified of death, because it knows this mental ego that it calls 'myself' will die... The True Self will surely have doubts about the unknown too. But as such, the True Self is not afraid of death. It has been there and back. The Risen Christ in you always knows that it will never lose anything real by dying..."**<sup>1</sup>

So earlier I said I was under no illusion that letting go of the False Self was easy. I do *not*, however, believe this emptying is impossible! I believe that Paul had indeed mostly let go of his False Self when he said – in The Message translation – **"Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus... firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him. I didn't want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ."**

Friends, I think many of us – most of us? – are suffering from a case of mistaken identity. Who we think we are, is not who we really are. We are confusing our resume and interesting, colorful histories with our True Self.

I bet some of you are rightfully asking, "OK, then, how do I discover my True Self? What does Paul really mean by the surpassing worth of knowing Christ?" As important as these questions are, let me simply say that those will be questions for another day. Keep coming back! As fellow students in "the school of love," know that learning this will also make a profound difference to how we relate to others, and even to how we conduct our peace and justice ministries. For now, however, let me leave you with the thought that *it is possible*.

Do I get bonus points for closing with an enigmatic Jesus quote? Jesus says: **“Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you’ll have it forever, real and eternal.”** (John 12:24 – 25, *The Message*)

Amen.

Richard Rohr, “Immortal Diamond,” pp. 141 - 144

### **Philippians 3:4b -11 (NRSV)**

Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

<sup>7</sup>Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup>More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup>and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. <sup>10</sup>I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup>if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.