

**Sermon Preached December 14, 2014
Year B, Advent 3 – True Self/ False Self
St. John’s Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury**

“The LORD has done great things for us, * and we are glad indeed.” [Psalm 126:4]

Amen.

A middle aged woman has a heart attack and is taken to the hospital. While on the operating table she has a near-death experience. During that experience she sees God and asks if this is it. God says no and explains that she has another 30-40 years to live. Upon her recovery she decides to just stay in the hospital and have a face lift, liposuction, breast augmentation, and a tummy tuck. She even has someone come in and change her hair color. She figures that since she’s got another 30 or 40 years she might as well make the most of it. She walks out the hospital after the last operation and is killed by an speeding ambulance. She arrives in front of God again and asks, “I thought you said I had another 30-40 years?” God replies, “Sorry, I didn’t recognize you.”

Today’s gospel reading is also about identity. John the Baptist is baptizing and proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. The Temple officials in Jerusalem are concerned. The crowds he is drawing indicate an authority and influence in competition with their own. So they send some representatives to John to question him. “Who are you? They ask, “Are you the Messiah?” “No,” says John, “I’m not the Messiah.” They ask, “Are you Elijah?” “No,” He says, “I am not Elijah” They ask, “Are you the prophet?” “No,” he answers, “I am not the prophet.” “Then who **are** you?” The Temple representatives have some ideas of who they think John may be, but none of them are who he actually is.

The question of identity is an important one. **Who** are **you**? How each of us answers that has implications for what we believe and how we live our life. We have different kinds of identities. As a child in your family, were you the smart one? The pretty one? The athletic one? The funny one? As an adult in your office are you the responsible one? The creative one? The one who does well? The best boss ever? At home you are the alcoholic Dad, the competent wife, the star-student son, the loser sister-in-law? Each role has different expectations to live into. But is that who we **really** are? At our core?

These sorts of small identities are what the theologian and mystic Richard Rohr call the “false self.” Things like “your body image, your job, your education, your clothes, your money, your car, your success,”¹ and so on. These are not bad per se, but they are an illusion and prevent us from getting to our True Self. He writes, “Your False Self is not bad or wrong; it is just mortal. It is relative and not absolute. It is passing and not substantial, a largely mental and cultural construct. It will die when you die.”² It is an incomplete self which is helpful during the first half of life, to get us started, but it is not who we truly are. Another word for our False Self is ego. It is when we get caught up in ego and False Self, and believe them to be our true identities, that we get in trouble.

For instance, this time of year we are told our identity is “consumer.” Our desire to buy and give gifts at Christmas may come out of a True Self place of generosity. But if we identify too much with our False Self as a consumer, our desire may instead come out of a place of shame, of keeping up with the Joneses, or of insecurity, of needing to be loved. So it is not the

¹ Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond*, p. 28

² Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond*, p. 64.

action which is telling, but the motivation. Out of which identity do we operate? Which brings life and which brings heartbreak? In the words of Oscar Wilde, “Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.”

But what is our True Self? Rohr says it is often referred to as our soul, that which is eternal; but it is more accurately understood as larger than that. Our True Self includes soul, spirit, and body. He defines the soul as “who you are in God and who God is in you.”³ It is eternal, and it is both connected to God as well as unique to you. It is where we are joined with God. The Spirit is the eternal breathe that was given to us all at our creation. [Romans 5:5]. And the body is a gift from God where we embody love and the good news in this life. It too is eternal in the resurrection. Interestingly, these three components are found in our reading today from 1 Thessalonians, “Rejoice always... May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound.” [1 Thes 5:23]. 1 Thessalonians defines our entirety, our true identity, our True Self, as soul, spirit, and body.

It is through an understanding of our True Self that we gain a true understanding of God. We come to embrace that we are, at our core, loved by and precious to the Almighty, and so too is everyone else. “Inside your True Self, you know you are not alone, and you know you ‘foundationally’ belong to God and to the universe.”⁴ When that truth becomes an integral part of us, everything changes.

³ Ibid, p. 16

⁴ Ibid, p. 24

Rohr writes, “If we could fully trust this, it would change our whole life agenda. This discovery will not create overstated or presumptuous individualists, as religion usually fears, but instead makes all posturing and pretending largely unnecessary. Our core anxiety that we are not good enough is resolved from the beginning, and we can stop all our climbing, contending, criticizing, and competing. All ‘accessorizing’ of any small, fragile self henceforth shows itself to be a massive waste of time and energy.”⁵

But our False Self must die in order for our True Self to live. Jesus says throughout the gospels that we must lose our life to save it. We must lose what is temporary to gain what is eternal. Our False Identity must die in order for us to see our True Identity. But we are so used to clinging to our False Self, we don’t want to let it go! We are often blinded by it into believing that it is real. That is why it must die.

But this death allows for resurrection, the bringing about of which, is the true role of religion. Rohr says, “this change of identity is the major – almost seismic --- shift in motivation and consciousness itself that mature religion rightly calls conversion. It is the very heart of all religious transformation. Without it, religion is mostly a mere belonging system or mere belief system, but it does not radically change your consciousness or motivation.”⁶ True mature religion, according to Rohr, is not about morality or belief, but about a change of identity and consciousness which transforms us.

⁵ Ibid. p. 14

⁶ Ibid, p. xxiv

We cannot see reality unless we operate out of our True Self. “Goodness and evil are both well disguised as long as you live in your False Self. That is the core of the problem and why Jesus is about a foundational change of the self rather than any cosmetic ‘moral’ changes.”⁷

So when the Temple authorities ask John the Baptist his identity, he doesn’t identify himself as being the guy who wears camel hair and eats locust and wild honey. He doesn’t identify himself as being the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. He doesn’t even identify himself as being a morally superior prophet. Rather, John identifies himself as the proclaimer of Jesus. He does not get caught up in his False Self, but recognizes that his True Self, his soul, spirit, and body, is bound up in God and what God is about to do in the world. He identifies his True Self to the authorities, which is to point to Jesus. He knows every aspect of his being is loved by, and belongs to, God. The authorities can do nothing to him. John is already in heaven.

My hair dresser enjoys discussing eternity and the cosmos and karma and tarot cards and consciousness. This week I got my hair cut and had a delightful conversation with her on these subjects, but what really struck me was when she said, “We all just need to wake up! The world needs to wake up to reality! And then all will be as it should.” That’s what Advent is about, to wake up! To be prepared for the bridegroom. To wake up to our True Selves. To wake up to our identity as beloved children of God. To allow death of our False Selves and wake up to resurrection and our True Selves. That was John’s message, “Wake Up!”

Who are you, **really**?

Amen.

⁷ Ibid, p. 47