



University Christian Church – Austin

C. Kutz-Marks

Becoming Who You Really Are

Pentecost 9, b, Aug. 9, 2009

Eph. 4:25-5:2

Please think back with me to an earlier time in our lives, way back when there were - what we used to call- “cool mornings.” Can you think back that far, probably all the back to March?

It was a cool April morning- about 50 degrees, I’d say- about 40 years in central Florida where I grew up. Still it was cool enough that as my best friend and I arrived as the first visitors of the day at the fresh water spring where we were going to be scuba diving for the day, since the air was so much cooler than the water, there was a steamy fog coming off the water. There was something very still and very mysterious about the whole setting. Before we put on our scuba tanks to go down into the depths of the spring, we decided that we would put on our masks, fins and snorkels and do a little reconnaissance of the area.

Much to our delight we quickly discovered that there were manatees in the water that morning. Manatees are strange creatures. They have hide that feels exactly like an elephant including the prickly hair. They have the shape of the Michelin Man with flippers. Their most attractive feature are these adorable puppy-like faces! Manatees are an endangered species in Florida because they move slowly, too slowly sometimes to dodge the whirling blades of outboard motors that scar the backs of every mature manatee that I’ve ever seen. But the young manatees are not yet attuned to the dangers of human beings and they would

likely be ready to eat the water lilies my friend and I would offer them that morning.

Snorkeling like this is always a surreal, dreamlike experience. The cold of the water numbs your sense of touch. The water in your ears changes your hearing to some kind of alien awareness. The sound of your own breathing is so amplified it occupies a great deal of attention. And the mask so circumscribes your vision to only that straight ahead of you, but at the same provides a clarity of vision that seems enhanced, like super vision, perhaps because your other senses are so dampened (no pun intended).

This particular morning it was especially surreal. In those days the famous marine explorer, Jacques Cousteau was an idol of mine. And that morning, by the greatest good fortune, Jacques Cousteau's son, Philippe, and his film crew were arriving there through the fog...the only other people at that very spring! They were there to film the manatees for a television show and my friend and I were excited to think that we might be captured for eternity in one of the great Cousteau documentary's.

It was also very strange, so very dreamlike and unreal. But then the moment that will always remain starkly beautiful in my mind...

One of the baby manatees who spotted the greenery in my hand came over to be fed. With great excitement and some fear I stretched out my hand to the creature and soon felt its lips gently caressing my hand as it took the gift I offered. It is the moment of contact I remember ... because it was the strangest, the oddest thing, a foreign creature, an unknown quantity ... but at the very same time it was a reconnecting with something already deeply known. It was a primal reconnecting ... not just communication, but a recognition that this manatee and I were really belonged together and that it was finally about time that we discovered it, or as Plato would say, about time that we remembered it. The philosopher Martin Buber

would have called it an “I-Thou” encounter. The Bible would name that drive to reunion of those separated, as LOVE.

Have you ever had that feeling? I do hope so, because powerful experiences like this can shake some of the scales from your eyes and challenge you to understand more deeply who you are and what life is all about.

A number of years ago two colleagues and I were planning the annual Disciples clergy retreat in Michigan. Unlike Texas where we have lots of Disciples congregations and plenty of opportunities for our pastors to share in common ministries & programs, in Michigan the Disciples congregations were few and far between. The clergy spent little time together and so one of our planning groups challenges was to help these clergy simply get to know each other. We came up with an exercise that I commend to you for your own use – one, that like my manatee encounter- turned out to be much more powerful than we anticipated.

Each minister was paired with another that he or she didn’t know well. One was instructed to take the risk of answering as honestly and as deeply as he or she could, while the other simply but sincerely keep asking the same question over and over for 5 minutes, “Who Are You?”

The early answers came easily, I am Fred, I am a Minnesotan, an American, a democrat, husband, father, friend, uncle, a Green Bay Packers fan.

As the time went on, the responses to “Who Are You?” got deeper: a Christian, a serious student of the Bible and Christian history, a child of God.

And then a bit later the answers came even more slowly, and more emotionally. “Who Are You?”: a conflicted set of emotions; just a man overwhelmed by my responsibilities; an aging, increasingly pain-filled body; a yearning for God. In many pairs, one or both of the ministers were in tears.

We reversed the roles and the very same process recurred. It was stunning to behold. When these ministers opened up to one another at such a deep level in

10 short minutes, new relationships were forged that still bless those ministers to this day. When we are honest about who we really are, a fresh and freeing energy is available to move us to live more faithfully, more deeply.

Decades ago the Italian psychiatrist Dr. Roberto Assagioli developed what he called the Disidentification Exercise that he used in his practice.ⁱ It is a quiet meditation that has one systematically consider all your self-identifications- as the ministers did in Michigan- and then to recognize that none of these self-identifications defines the real you.ⁱⁱ After some opening settings it begins:

“I have a body, but I am not my body. My body may be sick or well, tired or rested, but that has nothing to do with myself, my real “I.” My body is my precious instrument of experience and of action in the outer world, but it is only an instrument. I use it well: I seek to keep it in good health, but it is not my self. I have a body, but I am not my body.”

Then it moves to disidentify one from one’s emotions and intellect,ⁱⁱⁱ

These exercises and vivid experiences have the effect of kicking us up and out of our comfortable and customary ways of understanding who we really are, and opening us to embrace bolder, more faithful self-understanding.

As the poet Rumi put it:

“If you could get rid of yourself just once,
the secret of secrets would open to you,
The face of the unknown, hidden beyond the universe
Would appear on the mirror of your perception.”^{iv}

And the Bible surely does the normalcy dashing, too. Especially in this morning’s reading, it shakes us up and confounds our common sense take on ourselves and what we are to become in this life. Consider this morning’s passage,

after telling us not to let the sun go down on our anger; that we need to give up stealing for a living – duh!;

“be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love”

That’s a pretty tall order, calling forth the living a life of love, of compassion as thoroughly as God does. We see in Jesus what God’s compassion looks like and trying to emulate Jesus’ non-stop mission is a daunting thought, indeed, so most often we try to find a way to dodge God’s preferred future for us.

We dodge the challenge to take a risk and let go of our small ideas of who we are, and then wrapped only in the security of God’s love, to dive deep into the dark waters. It was St. John of the Cross who spoke of his own journey into the deep with poem:

On a dark night,
Inflamed by love-longing-
O exquisite risk!-
Undetected slipped away.
My house, at last, grown still.

God provides the challenge to each of us to take “the exquisite risk to still our own house....” As contemporary poet Mark Nepo writes,^v

“At any moment, if quiet enough and open enough, we can drop into the fabric of existence in which everything, even pain, has its vivid signature of that we call, at different times, truth or beauty or peace.”

“The exquisite risk that St. John speaks of is twofold: the risk to still our own house so that Spirit can come through, so that we might drop into the vital

nature of things, and the risk to then let that beautiful knowing inform our days.” And here he is speaking of what would otherwise be just perfectly ordinary days.

In his marvelous little book *Breakfast at the Victory*, James Carse writes, "The highest achievement of the spiritual life is within the full embrace of the ordinary. Our appetite for the big experience -- sudden insight, dazzling vision, heart-stopping ecstasy -- is what hides the true way from us." It is the extraordinary in the ordinary that can become prayer. In the Buddhist tradition there is an expression, "Chop wood; carry water," which is a way of saying that spiritual meaning can found in the smallest, most ordinary functions of the day. ^{vi}

This journey we are on is limitless in capacity on the one hand, is very limited time wise. We have only so many earthly days to effect the reorientation towards God and the holy in our lives. Turning in love towards God, and doing so soon is incumbent on each one of us. Sometimes religions have used this as a threat to scare people into change, I don't mean to be doing that now, the only moment you truly have is this moment... this moment to decide which way you will follow.

The Baal Shem Tov, the beloved founder of the Jewish Hasidic movement begun 200 hundred years ago, once said to his Disciples, "Imagine a palace with an infinite number of doors. In front of every door the visitor finds a treasure. Satisfied, he feels no urge to continue. Yet, at the end of the hallway, the king is waiting to receive those among his subjects who think of him rather than of the treasure."

Another of the Hassids, Rabbi Zusia, as he lay dying, said,

"When I shall face the celestial tribunal, I shall not be asked why I was not Abraham, Jacob or Moses. I shall be asked why I was not Zusia."

ⁱ For an audio experience of this Disidentification exercise see <http://www.aliharrison.com/psychosynthesis/Podcast/rss.xml>

ⁱⁱ Sit comfortably with your spine erect. Close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths while focusing on the sensation of breathing at your nostrils. Then affirm the following:

I have a body, but I am not my body. My body may be sick or well, tired or rested, but that has nothing to do with myself, my real "I." My body is my precious instrument of experience and of action in the outer world, but it is only an instrument. I use it well: I seek to keep it in good health, but it is not my self. I have a body, but I am not my body.

I have emotions, but I am not my emotions. My emotions are many, contradictory, and changing. Yet I always remain I, my self, whether in joy or in pain, whether calm or annoyed, whether hopeful or despairing. Since I can observe, understand and label my emotions, and then increasingly dominate, and direct, and utilize them, it is evident that they are not my self. I have emotions, but I am not my emotions.

I have an intellect, but I am not my intellect. It is more or less developed an active. It is my tool for knowing both the outer world and my inner world, but it is not myself. I have an intellect, but I am not my intellect.

I am the center of pure self-consciousness. I am a center of will, capable of mastering and directing my intellect, my physical body, my emotions, and all my psychological processes. I am the constant and unchanging self.

[This is a slightly modified form of Roberto Assagioli's exercise in the appendix of *Psychosynthesis*.]

^{iv} Quoted in *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions*

^v In his book, *The Exquisite Risk*

^{vi} (As noted in R. Scott Colglazier, *Finding Faith That Makes Sense* [St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1996], 79).