

Second Sunday After Pentecost

June 6, 2021

Genesis 3:8-15; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

The Authentic Self

If you grew up in the United States, you might remember Popeye the Sailor. He was a cartoon character created by Elzie Crisler Segar. According to Wikipedia, Popeye first appeared in the daily King Features comic strip Thimble Theatre on January 17, 1929. I am too young to remember his appearance in the comic strips. However, I do remember seeing him on television. Popeye had one eye, smoked a pipe, loved spinach, and had enormous forearms, the biggest I ever saw on a fictitious character. And while he may have had more than one memorable line, the one that always stuck with me was, “I am what I am.” I admired his unapologetic acceptance of himself then, and I still do. Self-acceptance is a gift, especially in a world where many people feel devalued, denied, dehumanized, and denigrated.

Many people internalize the negative messages they hear from others. For them, the “I am not worthy” refrain that plays in their heads is not a catchy line from a movie. It is an unrelenting and punishing drumbeat that never ends. Internalized oppression is harmful and painful. It is not an accurate self-evaluation because it is so damaging. An honest appraisal of who we are and who we want to be should be affirming. Regularly taking a personal inventory to determine if we live up to the values and ideals we hold dear can help us discern how we may best serve God and the people in our lives. When I engage in these reflections, I often include a prayer that goes something like this, “Dear God, please help me to become the person you know I can be so I can do the things you ask me to do.” My request is designed to help me to respond more fully to God’s direction for my life. Self-improvement work is very different from beating yourself up with negative messaging that comes from others.

When I read today’s Gospel, I saw parallels between what folks said about Jesus in Mark 3:20-35 and the negative comments many people hear from family members and sometimes “friends.” Words like, “She is not as smart as her brother,” “He’s not the sharpest tool in the shed, but we love him,” or “Don’t put them on a committee; nothing will get done.” And here is my personal favorite, a hostile or judgmental comment followed by “Bless their heart.” It sounds something like this, “They couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket, bless their heart.” Negative, critical, accusatory, and judgmental comments do not help us become the person we are meant to be.

The hurtful words hurled at Jesus, though, were intended to be even more destructive. People said he was out of his mind and called him a ruler of the demons. They wanted to diminish Jesus in the eyes of others, sidetrack his ministry, and get in the way of God’s plan. Because Jesus was making waves, changing the culture, upsetting the applecart, and folks wanted him to stop! Can you imagine what these folks would be saying on social media and cable TV if they had access to those communication vehicles back then? It gives me pause.

I like the fact that Jesus calls them out. He knows what they are trying to accomplish, and he will not let them get away with it. He dismantles their accusations and slander with the deft of a surgeon. The logic in his response is powerful. His message is clear. He cannot be who they say he is. It makes no sense to call him Satan. “How can Satan drive out Satan?” He asks. Then he goes on to say, “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.” One cannot simultaneously work against oneself and expect to survive.

Jesus also points out that in saying hurtful things about him, the speakers are saying bad things about the Holy Spirit. And he is not having any of it. He makes it clear that while other sins can be forgiven, slandering the Holy Spirit is unforgivable. I wonder what the world would

be like if we all acknowledged that slandering another is an assault on the spirit, the spirit that God breathed into them, and that act of verbal attack makes one guilty of an eternal sin. Might that realization stop hateful verbal abuse?

In Act 1, Scene 3 of Hamlet, Shakespeare wrote, “To thine own self be true.” It is a call to be authentic and to commit to being oneself, as you are. To be authentic is to be trustworthy and genuine. An authentic Christian, in my opinion, recognizes that God gave each of us a life to be lived as honestly, fearlessly, and faithfully as we are able. We are to use the gifts we are given to further the kingdom of God and care for one another.

Yes, there will be people who do not understand who we are. Some people will try to tear us down. Some people will try to make us believe that we will never amount to anything, be successful, or excel in our endeavors. Their predictions and judgments are not foregone conclusions. Only God knows who we are and what we can do. Here is my recommendation. Seek God’s input. Ask God to reveal to you your true self. Ask God to show you how to live your life authentically. Ask God to guide your path as a disciple.

And when the naysayers arrive, and they will, do not rent space in your head for their comments, especially when what they say is designed to hurt you. Even well-meaning negativity is still negativity.

And when you find yourself saying awful things to yourself about who you are, stop. I once heard someone say, “If someone else said to me the things I say to myself, I would really be upset.” Constantly tearing ourselves down does not further our growth or help us be Jesus’ hands and feet in the world. We would all do well to remember that first and foremost, we are children of God, created in God’s image to live a life that God imagines for us.

In closing, I offer for your consideration a poem written by the Dalai Lama. It is called:

A to Zen of Life

Avoid negative sources, people, places and habits.
Believe in yourself.
Consider things from every angle.
Don’t give up and don’t give in.
Everything you’re looking for lies behind the mask you wear.
Family and friends are hidden treasures, seek them and enjoy their riches.
Give more than you planned to.
Hang onto your dreams.
If opportunity doesn’t knock, build a door.
Judge your success by what you had to give up in order to get it.
Keep trying no matter how hard it seems.
Love yourself.
Make it happen.
Never lie, steal or cheat.
Open your arms to change, but don’t let go of your values.
Practice makes perfect.
Quality not quantity in anything you do.
Remember that silence is sometimes the best answer.
Stop procrastinating.
Take control of your own destiny.
Understand yourself in order to better understand others.
Visualize it.

When you lose, don't lose the lesson.
Excellence in all your efforts.
You are unique, nothing can replace you.
Zero in on your target, and go for it."

Popeye got it right. We are who we are. We are God's beloved.