

## 10 January 2021, The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

I begin with a little story from Hasidic Judaism. Rabbi Zusya said, “In the coming world, they will not ask me: ‘Why you were not Moses?’ They will ask me: ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”

Here is a question worth asking. Think of someone, living or dead, you admire; now insert the person and yourself into the question. For me: “In the coming world they will not ask me, ‘Why you were not Julian of Norwich?’” They will ask me: “Why were you not Richard?”

In our society we hear a lot about self-identity. The idea is that every person has a true self, to some extent hidden or repressed because of society. The assumption is that to find one’s true self is a do-it-yourself project, throwing off all shackles of convention, living from the core of one’s being, which can simply mean a person’s immediate desires. All progress toward human and Christian maturity is based on self-awareness; you have heard the Socratic saying, “An unexamined life is not worth living.” Much the same principle is in the Scriptures and traditional Christian spirituality. However, what is missing in many approaches to knowing the self, is reliance on a standard outside the self. Traditionally, knowing oneself was accomplished by honestly examining one’s life in relation to Truth revealed in the Scriptures, the Creeds, the historic Faith, 2000 years of Christian experience, and truth revealed in contemporary experience. Self-awareness was the fruit of a relationship between humanity and Truth revealed. To the extent one was in concert with Truth revealed, a person gave thanks for God at work in them. To the extent one failed in living up to such ideals, a person repented and sought amendment of life, that is, a renewed commitment to practicing the Truth, always with God’s help.

It was also assumed that such a journey of self-awareness could not be done without the guidance of those who are farther into the journey of self-awareness. In the Celtic Christian tradition this was referred to as ‘soul friendship.’ We are perhaps more familiar with the terms, spiritual director, or advisor. The principle is: We need the ideal to live toward and assistance in living into the ideal. Today we do not live in an age of self-discovery, but of self-definition.

Americans like to think of ourselves as ruggedly independent, individuals unrestrained by majority opinion. This is a myth. Human beings are simply herd animals. This is one reason why advertisers and politicians rely on polling data months before a political campaign or ad campaign even begins. They want to discover what will appeal to the broadest possible chunk of the population, and tailor their messages to attract the largest group even if the message is slightly or grossly deceitful.

The same strategies can be found in religious communities. About 50 years ago a new church was begun in a Chicago suburb. The first thing the church planter did was go door to door; not to invite people but to find out what they were looking for. The church was then tailored to conform to what people wanted. For example, the data indicated sin was not a popular topic, so sin was a forbidden subject in sermons and other media. Another example: people wanted a kind of Walmart church—everything under one roof. So, they offered facilities and programs for everything imaginable. This church was built on the self-identity of people attending the church.

Self-awareness, ironically, cannot be self-guided. There are the obvious reasons: because we think something is good does not make it so; we can be mistaken, foolish, self-destructive; if we do not go beyond what we are we will remain what we are. Neither is one’s true self defined by what most others are doing, thinking, or saying. We must be as suspicious of a mob mentality as the tyranny of individualism. What is the middle way? The way to self-awareness is through the nature of God and how God works in our lives. We cannot be merely self-guided nor rely merely on the ways of the world because every person is a unique expression of God’s divine creativity. While we are truly part of a much greater whole, every person is, at the same time, unique, conceived and born to be unique. It seems God never tires of ‘playing’ with creation, if you will, of creating a seemingly infinite number of variations of human personhood, each one distinct, exclusive, rare, and irreplaceable. Each unique expression of God’s creativity is meant to uniquely magnify God’s eternal loving-kind salvation for all. Each irreplaceable expression of God’s creativity—each person—is meant to journey with all creation into intimacy with God, being joined to God, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit with all life in praise and adoration, yet each song of praise sung by each person a one-of-a-kind manifestation of God’s eternal Truth.

As with so many aspects of our Faith, there is creative tension, paradox, and surprise as we seek to *grow up into the measure of the stature of Christ*. We are given Truth revealed apprehended through Scripture, Tradition, and Reason, offering ourselves to God, opening ourselves to God’s will in living God’s Truth in our relationships

and environments. This revealed Truth includes being actively engaged in Christ's Body the Church, learning from God's wisdom at work in others' lives, learning from others' triumphs and mistakes, relying on others' prayers and encouragement. Why? To reveal God's Truth. As we prayed in today's Collect: "...grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshiped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth..."

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, for ever and ever. Amen.