

Transformation: Becoming Who God Created Us to Be

Joy equals Jesus first, Others second, Yourself last.

I learned this formula as a child and it sounded good.

Other language used to talk and sing about the spiritual life confirmed this theology: *Deny yourself. Crucify the flesh. Kill the "old self." Forget about yourself and concentrate on Him.*

Some of these lines come out of the Bible, but I'm not sure the emphasis was always particularly biblical. It led to self-flagellation as an expression of piety and self-hatred masquerading as humility. It often paralyzed my spiritual growth rather than nurturing it.

On the other hand, our society tells us to do the opposite: *Look out for number one. Look after yourself first. I'm king of the world. I did it my way.* The free market economy and the media bombard us with these messages on a daily basis. We live in a society that trumpets the rights of the individual. Western psychologists have told us that the highest good is self-actualization. Is this the only alternative, or can we find a path between self-deprecation and narcissism?

Spiritual formation begins with the self and ends in community for the glory of God. Why should spiritual formation begin by focusing on the self? To be

"spiritually formed" we are formed into the likeness of Christ (Rom. 8:29; Col. 3:10); that is our goal in the individual Christian life, but how does it begin?

The greatest commandment is to love God (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:36-37). The human quest is to know God, to find ultimate meaning in life, a higher purpose for being. Genesis 1:27 says that we are created in the image of God thus it follows that we get to know a small part of what God is like when we get to know our selves. Each one of us reflects one small dimension of the personality of God. Since we are created in the image of God, to know God and to love God is to love our selves, to accept our selves the way God has made us to be.

The second commandment is to "love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). We cannot love our neighbour as ourselves unless we love our selves first!

To get to know our selves and accept ourselves, we must also begin to discover who we are, who God has created us to be. This is a journey of self-discovery that takes some time. We are all different, it is not how different we are or exactly how God has made us that matters most; it is what we do with what God has given us.

The best way to discover who God has made us to be is the process of reflection. Reflection can involve

experimentation with various roles, prayer, journaling and times of silence and solitude as well as listening to mentors, family and friends. This reflection on the self may be heightened during our younger years but it is a process that continues throughout life.

God has created us unique individuals with unique personalities, but we are never finished products. There's a saying, "God loves us so much he accepts us just the way we are but God loves us too much to leave us that way." God has called us to change, not to change into someone we are not, but to become more and more who we really are, who God created and called us to be.

The Greek word translated "transform" in Romans 12:2 also gives us the word metamorphosis. Metamorphosis is an apt illustration for spiritual formation. The caterpillar seems not to even resemble its former self when it spreads its wings as a butterfly, yet it is the same creature. It has become completely itself. So it is for us, when we are transformed by the Spirit of Christ, we truly become ourselves, who we were created to be.

I believe that there are too many people in our churches who have never come to terms with who they are and therefore are unaware that they are unhealthily preoccupied with themselves in their relationships with God and others.

Because they have not learned to love themselves as image-bearers of God they are unable to genuinely love their neighbour. By facing our own selves along with our shadows and blemishes, by being honest with God and ourselves about who we are, we create opportunities for authentic relationships of depth and health.

This is sometimes a very difficult thing to do, but until we do, we will (often unconsciously) continue to be too preoccupied with ourselves. In other words, to get the focus off of our selves and onto others, we must begin by intentionally focusing on our selves.

The focus on the self is not for the sake of the self; it is for the sake of God. Bernard of Clairvaux, a monk and spiritual leader of the 12th century, has helpfully delineated four degrees of love: Love self for the sake of self, love God for the sake of self, love God for the sake of God and—the highest--love self for the sake of God.

As we grow in our love for God we grow in love and acceptance of our selves the way God has created us in love. This is not prideful or narcissistic; it is true humility, seeing our selves as God sees us in Christ.

To focus on our self does not mean we do so in isolation. We need each other. It is impossible to develop an individual identity alone. We need others to find out

who we are: To compare ourselves, to hear from others, to interact, to learn from each other, to be challenged by those who are different from us.

The purposes of God are not realized primarily through individual spiritual growth; they are realized through the in-breaking of God's reign into our communities and our world. Our personal formation is for the sake of God and others, which brings us back to where we started! True joy comes from beginning with your self in the context of community for the sake of God and others.

As Parker Palmer has said, "Self care is never a selfish act--it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others. Anytime we can listen to the true self and give it the care it requires, we do so not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch."

Spiritual formation begins by focusing on our self but it ends in joyful communion with God, others and creation. The goal of spiritual formation is not self fulfillment but harmonious relationship; its end is the embrace of the Other: God, our enemy, our family, our neighbor and all of creation.

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