

## **An Ec-centric Life**

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**Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33**

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What if my “best self” isn’t located in me?

I know that’s a strange question, but bear with me.

What if the self I want most to be resides someplace else, outside of this fleeting consciousness, this ever-moving stream of opinions and perspectives and hopes and biases and regrets that I identify as my “self.”

Still strange? Well, it’s about to get stranger, because I want us to take a trip back to a long time ago when certain religious practices we would find very strange indeed were routinely performed in the faith of Jesus. They were so important — and so familiar — that in the book of Hebrews, they were used to explain the relationship between Jesus and us, and what it means to look elsewhere for our “best selves.”

Just over two thousand years ago the center of Judaism was a building complex in Jerusalem known as the Temple. It was not only the center of Jewish life, it was for the first generation of Christianity vital to the practice of those Christians who remained in the birthplace of our faith. Today when we think of Judaism we think of the synagogue, and, of course, when we think of Christianity we think of congregations like ours. But two thousand years ago for all Jews and many Christians their faith was not learned and practiced primarily in a gathered congregation, but was enacted for them in the Temple.

I remember very fondly one day when my rabbi, Neil, came by our home in Austin to pay me a pastoral visit. Debbie and I were in the stressful transition process of moving from Austin, from a home we loved and thought we’d retire and likely die in, to Louisville, Kentucky. We were doing the last minute things you do before staging your home for sale, and I had been waiting all day for flooring installers who had failed to show. A knock came on the door. It was Rabbi Neil, my friend. In one hand he held two very nice cigars; in the other a bottle of kosher wine. With a big smile on his face, he said, “I thought about now, you might need a little break.”

We went out back by the pool, found a shady spot and sat down.

“What shall we talk about?” He asked.

I paused. We talked about a lot of things.

“The Temple,” I said.

“This conversation could last forever,” said Neil smiling.

It's hard for us to imagine a faith that is more about what is done for us, than what we do. For most modern day Christians, we take great pride in being a "self" that is "self-reliant," responsible for its own actions and attitudes, a "self" that is more or less fixed and identifiable, having clearly held views based on experience, expected to bear the blame for what it does wrong and the credit for what it gets right. Indeed, for many of us, the "self" is worthy of defense, like a castle we have built with our own hands and now must defend from those who would attack it. And so, for us, religious faith is something "we have" or "we don't have," a collection of beliefs "we hold" or "don't hold," and things "we do" or "don't do"

Imagine, if you will, a faith that places more emphasis on things accomplished for us than things we do. For Jesus and his disciples that was "the faith." And it is because the Temple was so sacred, so much the center of "the faith," that Jesus cleansed it from those who were trying to make it into a common marketplace. "*My Temple should be a house of prayer, not a den of thieves,*" he shouted. And in a house of prayer, our attention is not focused on our "selves," it is focused on God.

The reason the Temple was a house of prayer, however, was because of what was done there. The Temple was where sacrifices were made. The people believed that somehow these sacrifices made things right between them and God. And, as C. S. Lewis once observed, because of what went on in the Temple, it was a place that smelled of blood. Blood ran throughout the day as animals were slaughtered upon altars. But, Lewis added, it was also a place where the aroma of roasted, fired meat rose throughout the day.

Images of the Temple sacrifices ran through the early Christian writings. I think perhaps the most well-known of these images is the very earliest one, in St. Paul's letter to the Romans, his exhortation that we should "present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God." But another passage in the New Testament is perhaps even more significant, though less often quoted. And it is our text from Hebrews today about the role of Jesus Christ as our High Priest.

The Book of Hebrews, Dr. Tom Long has argued, is essentially a sermon. It is driving home the core message of Christian faith using images familiar to its audience. And among the images most familiar to its Jewish-Christian audience was the image of the Temple and of that particular day once a year when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies to make his sacrifice for the sins of all the people, the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur.

On that day the High Priest wore a breastplate on which were engraved the names of every tribe of the People of Israel, and with that breastplate on, he made sacrifice. And when he did, all of the people of Israel were included in his action. He carried them all — all of what we would think of as their "individual selves" — into the Holy of Holies. This was more than symbolic, though it was that. It was sacramental. The whole people (no matter where they were or what they were doing that day) were lifted up into the presence of God, their sins confessed, and washed away.

Imagine it: Shepherds on the ranging hills tending their sheep, fishermen upon the lake throwing their nets, women in the village gathering the items needed for their families, the hated tax-collector collaborating with a Roman official, the shunned prostitute standing in a darkened doorway, the religious old man trembling at his prayers, the scoffer tossing dice in an alley with his cronies: they were all, every one of them carried into the Holy of Holies in the person of the High Priest, and there sacrifice was made for them; indeed, they made sacrifice unto God. No matter where they were physically in that moment, spiritually they were lifted into the presence of God.

The Book of Hebrews takes this image, and applies it fully to Jesus of Nazareth, calling Jesus our heavenly High Priest who now, in the presence of God eternally offers himself for us. Our names are carved upon his heart, as eternally he offers his prayers and himself to God, in atonement for our sin. But, this aspect of the atonement is only half of the story.

The heavenly High Priest also bears our names in himself presenting to God our true humanity, and promising that our true selves are right now a reality in him, and that he is sharing that reality with us through his Holy Spirit, that Spirit which is nothing less than the eternal Life and Love God shares as Father and Son. The power which was the Life and Love of God in Jesus throughout his earthly life, he now shares with us. This is the present reality of the atonement.

Karl Barth, the Reformed theologian, in a speech to pastors on the subject of the Heidelberg Catechism, once tried to explain the central theme of that catechism by saying “we exist eccentrically.” I’ve mentioned this before (as I know Beth Poe will remember, even if no one else does). Barth was explaining what it means to confess that *“our only comfort in life and in death is that we belong body and soul not to ourselves but to our faithful savior Jesus Christ.”* We don’t find our comfort, in other words, said Barth within the imaginary and temporary and fleeting little circle of consciousness we call our “self.” We don’t find our comfort in the puny strength of the self, its tenuous grip on truth, its inconstancy in love, or its tendency to defend itself. We find our comfort by discovering our “selves” in Christ, in letting go of our frightened grip on “self,” and allowing whatever this “self” might be to rest in God.

We have been liberated from the false “selves” we construct that always depend upon the way others see us. No longer are we the victims of some viscous monkey-on-our-backs whipping us to always be right or always be perceived as right. We can start again from that place of reality and sanity that confesses our limitations and frailties and faults, unsurprised when we fail to live up to expectations (especially our own). And we can start from there afresh every morning, no matter what happened yesterday, knowing that our “best selves” lie outside our “selves,” and are visible to us as in a mirror, when we look at this “son of God,” as Hebrews calls Jesus.

Thomas Merton once wrote: *“The only true joy on earth is to escape from the prison of our own false self, and to enter by love into union with the Life Who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature and in the core of our own souls.”*

It seems to me that this passage from the Book of Hebrews, exotic and esoteric as it seems to us, as hidden as it is in ancient religious practices which are no longer a part of either Judaism or Christianity, may be one of the least sectarian and most universally significant texts in all the Bible.

Our true selves do not need our continual tending and defending. We can let go of that burden, and we can rest in the trust that God not only removes the guilt we cannot expunge, but that God also reveals in his son both who we most long to become and the fruit of that becoming. We live eccentrically.

Amen.