

If It Were Only That Easy

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Joshua 24:13-25

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There's a famous conversation between Atticus Finch and his daughter Scout in "To Kill a Mockingbird." Atticus tells Scout that the only way really to understand another person is to climb into their skin and walk around in it. His advice came to mind this week when I opened my newspaper on Monday and read a story titled, "He already saw the election as good vs. evil. Then his tractor burned."

I've handed out a lot of bromides over the years like the one Atticus gave Scout, but this article pulled me up short. It's not because what Atticus said is false. That's not it. It is because it is nigh on impossible to get into someone else's shoes or their skin or to wear their hopes and worries. Sometimes understanding just won't come. And even if it does, it has to fight its way through my settled preconceptions, opinions, and assumptions about how the world works.

I walked away from that article saying to myself, "If it were only that easy." If all it took to understand another person was to walk a mile in their shoes, it would be swell, but it just isn't that easy. And when I walked away from that article, the story just wouldn't let me go. — — Or maybe it was the face of the young farmer in the story that I couldn't shake.

As soon as I saw that face above the article, a young farmer sitting in his pickup, I knew him. Oh, I don't mean I know that particular fellow, but I've known that farmer. I've known and loved folks from small towns and working farms across Texas and the South and the Midwest. I recognized him immediately, and I cared about him, and I wanted to understand him right away. And that's the problem.

You know I'm a farm boy. I feel comfortable in the country. I love country people. I love cattle and horses and old pickup trucks. The vehicle I learned to drive on was an ancient Ford tractor. At eight years old, to change gears I had to hop off the seat to drop the clutch, shift the gears, and spring back up on the seat again in time for the thing to stutter and shudder on its way

I saw this young man's face, and I thought to myself, "I've walked in his muddy boots through the same muck-filled barns and into the same cornfields. I know where he's coming from." But when I read the article, I realized that there's a lot I don't understand about him at all. And, I'm convinced, he's a really good guy, a good young husband to his young wife who is expecting their third child, a good daddy, an honest neighbor, a hard worker, a devout church member.

But when he and I look at so many of the same things and listen to the same people, we seem to inhabit very different worlds. I try to walk in his shoes. And I've been trying to figure out what to do about that since I read his story.

Now, I'm going to have to be real honest with you, and I hope our relationship by God's grace can handle this. Because I think only by making myself vulnerable in this way, can we explore a mystery of human nature and divine love that is beyond comprehension.

This young man and I did not support the same presidential candidate. That's not really so unusual. My mother and daddy used to say they went to the polls to cancel each other's vote. But what left me speechless, unable to understand, was how when I listened to his candidate speak I did not hear what this young man heard. When I looked at his candidate, I did not see the same person he did. The same was true of my candidate. When he looked at my candidate, he saw the end of civilization looming dark in our future. It was like our eyes didn't see the same reality.

I don't understand. It's like two people standing on a sidewalk near Audubon Zoo. They both see an animal loose, running from the zookeepers. One sees a monkey, the other sees a lion, and they can't agree whether the zookeepers are villains or caretakers. I don't understand. We're looking at the same things. And we share so much in common. Maybe you've had a similar experience during the past few years.

I'll come back to this story, but before I do, I want to open up another can of worms. Our gospel reading today includes one of the most compelling and confusing things Jesus ever said: "if anyone will come after me, let that person deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever will save his life, will lose it, and whoever will lose his life for my sake will save it."

I was speaking one evening to a gathering of Presbyterian ethicists, when I observed how striking it is to me that at the heart of two of the world's great faiths, Christianity and Buddhism, there is this teaching that the key to salvation or enlightenment is to lose our selves.

Immediately and ferociously one of the ethicists said, "You would not like that teaching at all if you were a woman or if you were marginalized. It is because you are an older white man that you like that teaching."

I thought for a moment, because I've heard this argument often in the academic world that I lived in then, and then I said, "I can sort of see how your argument holds some water with me, but I can't for the life of me see Jesus of Nazareth or Gautama Buddha in line for your criticism." I'm also not too sure I like this teaching, either. But it does seem to be central to both of these faiths.

The more I have thought about it, the more I've realized that I missed the salient point in that conversation. My friend, the ethicist, demonstrated one way of clinging to self and I demonstrated another way to do the same thing. Both of us were clinging to ourselves and neither of us could see it.

She reacted with a prepared argument that represents the way she defines herself. I've heard my friend define herself often as a feminist theologian. That definition of herself is an essential

aspect of her identity. I responded with a clever repost because I enjoy being a gadfly and a provocateur.

But in both cases, we were simply reacting out of well-defined and well-rehearsed personal constructs called the “self” which we have built over years and years, and which we cling to for identity and security and status.

That conversation, as I look back on it now, reminds me of something the Trappist monk Thomas Merton once said about the masks that we wear over our true faces. Presenting only our masks to one another, we never know each other; we may never know our own faces. Merton grieves that it has become so common to believe the mask at the expense of the truth, that we are in danger of living entirely for the sake of fictitious selves.

When we get down into the theological weeds, it’s easy to lose sight of what we are talking about when we talk about losing our selves for the sake of Christ. Ironically, one of the most helpful insights I’ve come across to understand this is from Pema Chodron, who is not a Christian.

She explains that the self is really just that bundle of opinions, which “we take to be solid, real, and the absolute truth about how things are.” If we can bring ourselves “just to begin to see that we do have opinions” we have begun the process of letting go of the selves we construct. “We don’t have to make these opinions go away, and we don’t to criticize ourselves for having them.” If we will simply recognize that we are not defined by our opinions, by our assumptions, by our takes on reality, and if we can let go of deriving our meaning and our worth and our identity and sense of belonging from them, we can begin the process of being set free.

Another way to say this is to say that losing our selves begins when we learn to take ourselves lightly and to hold our perspectives more loosely. It is only to the degree that we do this that we are capable of loving one another when understanding is impossible.

Jesus is not calling us to do something easy here. He is calling us to step out into a place where all the props drop away.

This man who lost everything by which a man is identified as good, this person designated as a religious heretic and a blasphemer of God, a wine-bibber and friend of sinners, a criminal and a traitor, tortured and stripped naked on a cross, he invites us to a place where we let go of all that defines us as worthwhile. We all yearn to belong, and he asks even that we let go of that which says, “I belong.”

Jesus asks for a lot when he invites us to lose our selves, the selves we work so hard to construct, the selves of which we are so proud, the selves that offer us some consolation, some security in a tough world. But he does this because he knows that it is only by losing ourselves that we can experience the life for which God intends us.

Several years ago I came across this cryptic phrase in the Reformer John Calvin's writings: "Jesus Christ is the mirror of our sanctification." This is one of those theological concepts that just won't yield to theological thinking alone. It requires existential thinking; it requires the kind of thinking that emerges when we have found ourselves at the end of our rope, or up a dead-end street, or spiritually and emotionally bankrupt.

"Jesus Christ is the mirror of our sanctification." It is a saying that reminds me that my identity is not something I construct, but is a gift of grace. It reminds me that my identity is hidden in the humanity of this humble man, this Palestinian Jew in whom we believe God revealed himself. It means that if we want to see what it is to be fully human, we don't look at ourselves at all, but into that face which did not hide behind a false mask of his own making.

I am grateful that God does not demand that I understand others, only that I love them. People are complicated. People are a mess of mixed motives, self-justifications that frankly fool nobody but ourselves. People grow unevenly, mature in one way, only to be foolishly immature in another, generous here and selfish there, souls of wheat and weeds all mixed up together.

I still don't understand how people can look at the same facts and end up with such different judgments. I don't get it when that nice young farmer ends up supporting someone for president whom I can't stand.

Fortunately, perfect love does not require understanding. And perfect love has one benefit that beats understanding hands down; perfect love casts out fear.

Amen.