

Our Needs are Holy to God: The Need to be Real

Luke 8:26-30,35

I'm adding a new need to Dr. Seuss' list of the basic needs of children: the Need to be Real! Think of all the children's book and myths about persons discovering who they really are: Cinderella, The beggar who turns out to be king, the frog that is a prince....

What does it mean to be real? Does it mean to be more truly, fully who you are, as God has made you who you are? Let's see.

I

The inspiration for this sermon came from a classic children's book, *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams. It tells of a stuffed velveteen rabbit in a child's room which at Christmas time was left over in a corner when all the shiny new mechanical toys were given as gifts. They had taken over the room.

The Velveteen Rabbit felt lonely and rejected and quite inferior to the new gadgets and toys in the house. One day he struck up a conversation with the wisest and oldest toy in the house, The Skin Horse. The Skin Horse's brown coat was now bald in patches. Most of the hair on his tail had been pulled out, but he had seen many shiny mechanical toys come and go, and he was still around.

The Velveteen Rabbit was sitting beside the Skin Horse one day and asked:

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit....“Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“Real isn’t how you are made”, said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real”.

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes”, said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up”, he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn’t happen all at once”, said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real, you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

“I suppose you are Real?”, said the Rabbit....

“The Boy’s Uncle made me Real”, he said. “That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can’t become unreal again. It lasts for always.”¹

II

I believe Jesus came to make us Real by his great loving of us. What does it mean? How does it happen? I think it comes in our connection with our true self, our down deep real self.

The monk Thomas Merton often spoke of the spiritual journey as a process of leaving behind the false self, or false selves, we created and discovering our true self, created by God in God’s own image.

The child, and the child in us, is in search of the true self. Are we only what we do to please others, to gain their approval, parents or parent-figures, the other in our lives? Or is there something deeper in us? We learn early how to perform so to win the applause of others, but what is there beneath our costumes? The poet May Sarton wrote:

Now I become myself. It’s taken
Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people’s faces.²

There are the roles we've chosen to play, or been given to play. Sometimes these roles obscure who we are, our true self. So we put them aside. Or, we discover how to live them out in authenticity. The poet e.e. cummings wrote:

To be nobody-but-yourself—in
a world that is doing its best,
night and day
to make you everybody else—
means to fight the hardest battle
which any human being can fight;
and never stop fighting.

III

So how do we get there, to our true self and become real? It is our most profound human journey. I picture it this way. There is a large circle. At its center is a small circle called the true self. This is the self created in the image of God with all its uniquenesses yet sharing with other the deepest meaning of the image of God: the capacity to love and be loved.

But between the circumference of the circle and the small circle in the center is a number of concentric circles which are layers of false self. The spiritual

journey is an excavation through all the layers of false self to discover and recover the true self. As we reconnect with our true self we connect with God.

We all have many layers of false self. They are formed by the ways we have responded to the world and what has happened to us. They are our defense mechanisms, our roles, our compulsions and addictions; they are the false stories we tell about ourselves to ourselves.

I once preached a sermon series on the Seven Deadly Sins. Do you remember what they are? Pride, Sloth, Envy, Anger, Greed, Gluttony and Lust! You might be able to add a few! What I discovered as I preached the series, then wrote a book about them, is that they are all compulsions of the false self, and all distortions of love.

It is no easy journey nor quick, to peel away the layers of false self to discover the true self. To take this “Expedition to the Soul”. And we generally do not start out in earnest unless some dimensions of the false self begin to play havoc in our lives.

IV

What is the nature of the true self? First, I would say, wholeness, oneness. The spiritual journey is about overcoming the divisions in the self so we can be

divided no more. For example, the division between our public self and our private self. Our soul lacks coherence, integrity, wholeness and oneness.

The story of the healing of the Geresene demoniac is a powerful one to me. He is the very picture of the divided self. When Jesus asked his name the demoniac said, "My name is Legion". (A Legion of soldiers numbered a couple thousand.) One translation says, "My name is Mob!" Ever felt like there was a mob inside? A thousand voices vying for your attention?

On his road to conversion, C.S. Lewis was given a painfully true picture of himself. In C.S. Lewis' mind, this was the work of God's Spirit. This is what he wrote about the experience:

For the first time I examined myself with a seriously practical purpose. And there I found what appalled me: a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds. My name was Legion.³

We are on a journey to Wholeness, Oneness. And here is the hope of the gospel: there is a place deep within where we are one, where we've never been wounded, a place of serenity and sureness and peace. Thomas Merton wrote:

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, (fruitfulness, vitality) a hidden wholeness.⁴

A hidden wholeness, and Jesus leads us there. An important name for Jesus in early Syrian Christianity was *Ihidaya*, the one who is One, the one who is Whole.

V

The other dimension of true self is love. Love of God, love of others and love of our own dear self. We learn to take our own self into our arms like a child and love it as we have always wanted to be loved, needed to be loved.

It's not always a painless journey, as the Skin Horse said. In the process we may get bald in some places and lose some of the hairs in our tail, but it's worth it for we were made by love for love.

That's how God became Real, entering our time and place in Jesus of Nazareth, flesh of our vulnerable flesh, loving us to the end, holding nothing back, even to the cross.

Paul says that Christ is "the image of the invisible God, first-born of all creation." It is the image of love, and Christ connects us with our true self of love.

Conclusion

We are on this journey *together*, thank God! We wouldn't make it on our own.

What does it mean to be Real? I'll add one more thing. It means, as Professor Ann Ulanov says, not only to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, but to *live* with all our heart mind soul and strength. Live!

1. Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Running Press, 1981), pp. 14-16.
2. May Sarton, "Now I Become Myself", *Selected Poems of Mae Sarton* (N.Y.: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), p. 191.
3. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (N.Y. Harcourt, Brace, 1955), p.226.
4. Thomas Merton, "Hagia Sophia", *Emblems for a Season of Fury*.