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**Becoming Ourselves – James 1:19-27; Luke 16:19-31**

We are what we are right now. But do we know who we really are? You see, who we are is not who we could be. But we've got to start somewhere.

One way to explore who you are is to ask, how did I get here? Have you ever taken the time to reflect on your life, to connect the dots that brought you from one place or job or interest to another? That's a kind of autobiography. It can be a valuable exercise; it almost surely will hold some surprises; it is an examination of your life. Socrates, according to Plato, remarked that "The unexamined life is not worth living." On the other hand, Kurt Vonnegut wondered "...what if the examined life turns out to be a clunker as well?"

For the faithful Christian, more valuable than just tracing our personal history is a spiritual autobiography. Those of you who came to yesterday's Grace Fest heard one, however brief, from my wife, Valerie. Just like a typical historical autobiography, your spiritual autobiography will be filled with highs and lows, peaks and valleys, an undulating topography of your interaction with God.

The problem, though, is that both of these narratives – spiritual or historical – is written from our own personal point of view. Well, that’s a news flash: if I’m telling my story, then it has to be the story of what *I* have seen, felt, and experienced.

A full understanding of who we truly are has to include what others see in and think about us. The oracle of Delphi supposedly said, “Know thyself,” which is the motto of my college, its seal showing a person representing Knowledge pulling a sheet off a young person’s head and pointing to an open book that says, “Light and truth;” but we really can’t know ourselves unless we know what others see in us: in a sense, reading the “book of us” that others do. “To thine own self be true;” Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet*; yet who *is* that self?

Have you ever – be honest now – stolen a glance at your reflection in a shop window or as you passed by a mirror? Just to see what you look like, of course. Does reflection match your own self-image? One fascinating thing I learned from cocaine addicts is when they deep into the drug, they never saw their faces in the mirror: they could see their hair or whatever it was that they wanted to check, like their lips or a blemish. They did not – could not – see a face. You could say that they *lost themselves* in the drug. What do you see in your mirror? Is that you?

Another part of who you think you are has to do with your name. Some cultures have more than one layer of naming. You may think of yourself as Joan or Bill, but in these groups, once you reach a certain age you are either given a public name (what everyone will call you from that time on: your name before, up to that point, will be private, used only in a family setting), or you are given a true name, based on the personality that you've developed into in the process of maturing.

We do have some glimmers of this: the old custom of "Christian names," for example, or nicknames, like Punky or Parkie among us, or Dent (as one of my fraternity brothers was known to us) or even Larry (though my peers in Old Forge would call me "Frog").

My point is that while most of us think we know ourselves pretty well, we are, at least on some level, self-deceived. We cannot know ourselves fully without knowing how others see us; and it's almost impossible to know ourselves as we are known to other people. A life-long search for some people.

The process of trying to know who we truly are requires that we be in community, that we receive and take seriously the perceptions of others about us.

Now, two quick caveats: one, a lot of unhealthy self-understanding can come from taking *wrong* or malicious impressions of others too seriously. Knowing the false impressions of others *can* help you

understand yourself better, help how you present yourself; but if you believe toxic lies about yourself, motivated by jealousy or manipulation, then you have a very bad – and incorrect – picture of yourself. The second warning is that it's also easy to take praise too seriously: it, too, can be manipulative and destructive.

By this point, you probably think I'm simply talking psychobabble: new age, trendy stuff that has nothing to do with *you*, who have lived long enough to know, by God, who and what you are, and it certainly has nothing to do with Christian faith.

I'm not talking pop psychology. This is something far more important: I'm talking about each of us becoming who we are truly meant to be – crafted by God, redeemed by Christ, and living in the Spirit.

Jesus tells a parable in Luke. His story is often used to lay guilt on the rich and advocate for the downtrodden (in the case of Lazarus, the literally stepped-on, or over, since he lived at the entrance to the rich man's house). Notice: he actually has a name, and the rich man doesn't – that itself is a powerful *statement of omission* on Jesus' part. Yes, this is a parable about wealth and privilege; but it's also about these two men's real selves. Jesus tells the Pharisees, tells us, that Lazarus, though poor, is a richer person than the wealthy man. Because Lazarus has a different kind of wealth: the riches of faith.

The rich man saw himself, though, as better than Lazarus – consciously or not. Privileged. Lazarus no doubt thought of himself, if in fact he ever had a minute to reflect through the haze of his suffering, as worthless, deserving of his lot, but still he trusts in God.

Neither man seems to be able to see through the distractions and trappings of wealth or poverty to really know themselves. It's only after both die, and their characters are laid bare before God, that their true selves become evident. Even while he suffers the torment of those eternally separated from the presence of God, all the rich man can think of is: one, being served – “tell Lazarus to bring me a drop of water” (that takes some gall, doesn't it?) – and two, his own family, specifically his brothers (“send Lazarus to warn them...”). Even in death, he has not learned that his true self is and has been completely self-centered.

On the other hand, Lazarus discovers that God's view of him is totally unlike anything he has ever dreamed: he is carried by angels to Abraham's side among the blessed. I'm guessing, but if Father Abraham didn't stop him, that Lazarus would jump down to do the rich man's bidding. His true self was – and is – humble.

Jesus frames his point in a way we can all relate to – the classic contrast of haves and have-nots. But he doesn't condemn wealth or celebrate poverty: his message is far deeper. He is talking about wealth of character: who each of these men truly was, not in their own

estimation or in the sight of other human beings, but how they were seen – and known – by the one who gave each life, who gave each gifts and watched to see how they would be put to use – how they are known by God.

So, does this give you any food for thought about your own spiritual autobiography – or God’s biography of your spirit, the *you* that God created you to be?

James, in his letter to the church scattered across the world he knew – and to us – has his own take on this: in Jesus Christ, we are given the tools and guidance to become who we really are, who God intends us to be: (James 1:19-27).

At the beginning, I invited you to recall those furtive glances at our own reflections in “mirrors of opportunity.” James suggests that there is another sort of mirror, not the one over your bathroom sink that keeps track of every new wrinkle, not the one that reflects – as many of ours do – an image of someone we don’t fully recognize, as our earthly bodies change, but a sacred mirror that reveals our true selves, our souls, God’s creation within us – as James says, “the word within you.” James says we were meant to be so much more than any of us is; God created humanity to live graciously and generously and peacefully in community, and I truly don’t know a single human community that could be described that way over time, certainly not the church.

But the Gospel message is that we can become those things: gracious, generous, peaceable; we are, deep inside, made that way. We are made to live together in love. We are made to reflect Christ to others, just as a mirror reflects our image to us. We are made, in fact, to be true – true images of the invisible God, true witnesses to his power in our lives, true lovers of others as Christ is lover of each of our souls.

Are you willing to become who God made you to be? Here's one mirror – the Bible. Have a look. Let it read you, and find out what you see.