

Epiphany

I want to begin with a question. How do you define yourself? How do you try to show to the world that you are someone important, someone distinct and lovable?

This is an important question; because this is something we spend a lot of time and effort as humans doing. And we all have our collection that we use to define our self. As I was preparing for this I realized that I have quite a collection that I have been working hard to put together. For example I have this nice clergy shirt, complete with a collar to mark me off as some how holy and as a religious leader, it is fascinating, just by wearing this, I can have complete strangers either start telling me some pretty personal part of their life or cause them to quietly cross to the other side of the street. Lets see, I have a nice degree from Harvard, which is a way for me to convince my self and others that I am somehow smart and thus important. Now this works great except for people who have actually been to Harvard and know the truth. I have my new iphone, a nice Christmas present and a wonderful consumer device that not only lets me text Susie, but it also allows me to convey to the world that I am some how cool, technically with it, and important enough to be connected. All of these, along with many others things, I have used to convince me and others of who I am, that I am some how significant, somehow good some how lovable. And all of us do something similar. The success of our children, the state of our house, what we do for a living, positions held or perhaps you have your own version of an iphone, we all have our own collection. The problem is that none of these are who we really are.

This is also true in religion and in our relationship with God. Now I have something that I am sure that none of you have. This is my official certificate, offered by our seminary, to certify me as Lutheran. Lets face it, compared with being at church on Sundays, serving on church committees, sending children to confirmation, success or anything else you folks might have to show that you are loved by God, really who can top being a certified Lutheran. It is all pretty silly. And yet constructing our sense of self, before others, before our self and before God is one of the things we often commit a significant part of our life to.

You see one of the important insights of Christian spirituality, it is an insight that goes back to St. Paul and even before. All of us try to construct a sense of self, before God and before others, that is constructed out of our deeds, and our titles, it is constructed out of the groups we belong to, our standing before others and the beliefs we have. It is constructed to try to convince not only others, but also our selves, that we are some how important, that we are lovable, and that our existence matters. In response the Christian faith simply sighs in sorrow, for all of this is what is called the false self, and all of it is something that just passes away, it is all sin, that is it all misses the mark of who we truly are.

This is a part of what the message of Epiphany is in part all about. What is an epiphany, it is a moment of great insight, and in the church year it is also the celebration of the coming of the Magi, these wise men from the East, which represents how the birth of Jesus was good news for Gentiles, which includes all of us, as well.

For the problem of the false self at the time of Jesus, was expressed very clearly in Religion. For despite a strong prophetic tradition that kept pointing towards the very opposite point, Judaism of the time, like most religions, was in a large part an elaborate system of practices, places and genealogies used to define both who was loved by God, but also who was considered outside of God's love. Who were the people of God, and who were the barbarians, open for slaughter, enslavement, neglect or condemnation to hell itself.

Then along come the Magi. While most of the people who thought they were God's only chosen people were completely unaware, it is the Magi who came to Jesus. Now by both ancient standards and by many of the religious standards of today, these are people what many would have considered outside of God's salvation. The word Magi, doesn't signify that they were kings, rather it suggests that they were priests, likely Zoroastrians, but that they were from the east could mean that they were perhaps Buddhists, Hindus or from some long forgotten polytheistic faith. They were not Jews, and they were definitely not Christians, since Christianity did not yet exist. And yet it was these Magi, who saw the signs, who brought gifts speaking of Jesus's life, gold for a king, myrrh for one who will die, and frankincense for God. The Jewish people of Jesus's time, like many Christians today, may have constructed a fabulous collective identity that defined them, and often them alone, as God's only beloved and chosen people, but it is these gentiles, these priests of a foreign religion who journeyed and came to worship Jesus.

And over 60 years latter, the same issue remained and Paul speaks to its very heart. In the section before the one we read, Paul writes “He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body, through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

There is a profound problem with our false selves. Normally what ever we use to define our self, is also what we use to define our selves as separate, and often superior to others, though some times also as inferior to others. Clergy vs. laity, Managers or executives vs workers. How I define my self as a good father, usually underneath implies those I look down upon as bad fathers. And when most of us have in the back of our minds our list of successes, though we often won't admit it, it is usually our way of placing our selves above someone else, it is how we try to define our self as somehow more valuable or worthy and not just when we apply for jobs. This is clearly seen in our political life where we routinely use nationality, an accident of birth, to define who will let starve in the world, after all look at our health care or defence vs. foreign aid budgets. And conversely, what is also a problem is how we also construct our self image to define ourself as some how lesser, some how separate from others and not worthy.

And religiously, what do you think the requirement for me to have a Lutheran certificate after studying at an ecumenical setting is about, Why do people often give me a kind of list of how they are fulfilling their church commitments, why are the biggest church fights if they are not

about who should have power in a church they are usually about who should be excluded or about who we think isn't really saved. I wonder if these fights are really our own anxiety about God's love, that is simply expressed in our attempt to make our self more lovable, more worthy, while excluding others, from a love we fear is limited.

At its heart of all of this is our false self constructions, which may be our attempt to distinguish our self before God and others, but what Paul saw clearly was that in reality they are how we separate our selves from God and from others. The epiphany of Epiphany is that Christ came to abolish all of this.

As Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved, through faith and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works so that no one can boast." No one can boast. In Christ God comes to us, and before that grace no one can boast. No one is better, then another, no one is more worthy than another or less, no group is more in God's love and another out. However we construct our false self, before God it is nothing more than our own boasting, and in the face of grace, it is irrelevant. It's false.

What is real is that by Grace, by God's unconditional love, God comes to you, even to us gentiles, to dwell in us and by God's dwelling we are made a new creation, holy beings in whom what is of God and what is human are joined together. And compared to this gift, given to all who will receive it. This is the only thing that is eternally significant, this is what is Holy. And what every you might do to construct a self that is either more or less loveable it is simply irrelevant.

And if this gift of grace is freely given, then it is freely given to all. Look around you, not only here, but as you walk down the street, what you are seeing is walking, breathing temples of God Most High, no matter who they might be, this is the epiphany of epiphany, if Jesus's birth is good news for astrologer priests from some eastern religion, then God is born for who ever you meet.

This though is only half of it. For Paul writes not only about us being reconciled by God, but about peace being made between those that the law had been used to separate. For if we have been reconciled to God, we are now in God and a part of Christ's body, and who ever they might be, *they* have also been reconciled by God, into God, and since there is only one God, that means that by God's grace, what ever might separate us, what ever we might use to make ourselves as distinct, as somehow more important or as some how lesser, in reality it is all partial lies, in terms of what is eternal we are more profoundly connected then we are separate. Paul makes clear when he describes us not individually as temples of God, but rather he describes how we are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

The epiphany of epiphany is not only that God comes to me, making irrelevant any false self that would separate us from God, but also that because God comes to us, any false self that we construct to separate us from God or from each other, is also abolished by God's grace.

So how do we live this. The reality is that all of us grasp on to our false self so tightly that though it may be destroying us, we usually cannot let go until we can grasp onto something else. So as individuals

follow the wise men and come to seek out Christ, come daily, come weekly to Christ, offering up the treasures of your life, until who you are with Christ is more important than anything else.

And as you walk around dare to see God's presence in others. Now it may be utterly hidden, confused and twisted by that person's false self, but in each of us, there is spirit, the coming together of God and what is human, and thus something profoundly holy struggling to come out, instead of being angry with someone, what could you do to set it free, and to help that person see what is holy in them.

For the gift of epiphany is this, God's light has come in to the darkness of all the false selves we have constructed to hide who God has made us to be God's that light not only burns brightly in the world, but it also has come to brightly to shine in each of us, so that God's light in us, might not only enlighten us, but also all who God brings near to us.

Amen