

This past Christmas my wife received the bestselling book "The Help" as a gift. For her it was one of those books you can't put down but when you get to the last chapters you only read a few pages at a time because you don't want it to end. It has been made into a movie but we couldn't watch the movie until she finished the book. I won't tell you the whole plot, but I will say it's set in Jackson, Mississippi in 1963, the key characters are Skeeter Phelan, a young white writer, and Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson - black maids working in white households; the central issue is the ability or inability of people to see through the stereotypes of racial identity and make a connection with the human being that is on the other side of the skin color.

In a sense the book explores the possibility of the dream that Martin Luther King articulated in front of a sea of humanity gathered on the national mall in August of 1963: I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I suspect that this weekend there will be many who comment on how far we've come since 1963 and how far we have to go to fully achieve Dr. King's dream. But if you think of that issue in terms of the scriptures we read today, maybe the focus turns more inward on the spiritual environment than outward on the social, political, or economic environment.

The Bible is always drawing us towards a deeper sense of self than all those things that so often define us - even those things we might proudly list on our resume - Age, marital status, family, education, job history, honors and awards, civic involvement and so on. As great as that might be, or however we judge it, add it all up and it does not come close to describing how we are seen in the eyes of God.

O God, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue,
O God, you know it completely.

You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you,
for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.

My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written all the days
that were formed for me, before they existed.

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!

I try to count them -
they are more than the sand;
I come to the end -
I am still with you.

Monday we are having a funeral here for Phil Lovell. Yesterday we had a funeral for Libby Porter and last week for Gil Nelson and the week before for Richard Armstrong. As is usual we take a little time and go through the resume, but the woeful inadequacy of it to describe the person quickly becomes clear. You strive for the insightful story, the telling detail, something to shine a light on the content of a person's character. That is hard enough. But there is even more. There is the soul.

Resume and even character distinguish us from one another, but soul is what unites us not only with each other but with God. Our true identity is not just who we are in ourselves but who we are in God.

I think it was Thomas Merton who said we can't think we know who we are just because there are people who seem to recognize us when we walk down the street. He said it's a spiritual disaster to rest content in our exterior identity - our race, our gender, our resume. Since we are made in the image and likeness of God, there is no way to know ourselves without knowing that image in us - and not just to say it's there or know it with the mind, but we must put it in action by love.

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote: The image of God is in the soul according to the knowledge it conceives of God and according to the love that flows from that knowledge."

I'm not sure I fully understand what Aquinas means, but I think it begins with a recognition that we are known and loved by God, and this self awareness helps us step back from our tendency to worry about ourselves and to judge others - it awakens in us a love for God and a love for neighbor, a sense not of estrangement but of unity, a sense not of fear, but of trust.

This is the work of moving from fear to trust is the work of conversion. We can't think of conversion as just the Pentecostal spectacle of sudden transformation - one second I'm a sinner and in the blink of an eye I'm a

saint. That is often only skin deep. The majority model for conversion in the bible is an extended process with seasons of growth and seasons of setbacks, seasons of clarity and seasons of confusion.

Look for a minute at the story of Nathanael this morning. He seems to have a pretty quick conversion, but Jesus pushes back a little on it. Wait and see - for now just walk with me - be a disciple, then we'll see what you have to say.

We don't know too many specifics about Nathanael - but in general the disciples were not what you'd call quick learners. And yet Jesus saw something in each of them that they probably didn't know was there themselves - and you certainly would not have guessed their potential based on their resume.

Years ago when I was participating in college sports my school would give us t shirts to wear that said Property of Rutgers Athletic Association. A lot of my identity was wrapped up in being a member of the crew team at Rutgers and I would wear that shirt like it was my job - even if I put on a suit and tie, underneath I'd have on that t shirt that said Property of Rutgers Athletic Association. It defined who I thought I was.

Today I don't wear that t shirt. Today it's kind of chilly, I'm wearing lots of layers. But I know that if you strip away all the layers, if you go even more than skin deep and get to that place that is at the core, at the center, and you look closely you'll see a different identity - you'll see the words Property of God - and not just in me, but in each of us. If we remember that, we will grow in trust and love no matter what life brings our way.

Let us pray:

O Omnipotent God, who cares for each of us as if no one else existed and for all of us as if we were all but one, blessed is the person who loves You. To you we entrust our whole lives and all we have received from you. You made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

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