

EVOLVING FAITH

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Text: A sermon related to Genesis 4:1-10 (Common English Bible)

CENTRAL FOCUS:

That it is only through cultivating connection to our True Self that we deeply connect with God and overcome violence to be a people of peace and justice.

Adam knew his wife Eve intimately. She became pregnant and gave birth to Cain, and said, "I have given life to a human with the Lord's help." 2 She gave birth a second time to Cain's brother Abel. Abel cared for the flocks, and Cain farmed the fertile land.

3 Sometime later, Cain presented an offering to the Lord from the land's crops 4 while Abel presented his flock's oldest offspring with their fat. The Lord looked favorably on Abel and his sacrifice 5 but didn't look favorably on Cain and his sacrifice. Cain became very angry and looked resentful. 6 The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why do you look so resentful? 7 If you do the right thing, won't you be accepted? But if you don't do the right thing, sin will be waiting at the door ready to strike! It will entice you, but you must rule over it."

8 Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." [b] When they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

9 The Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

Cain said, "I don't know. Am I my brother's guardian?"

10 The Lord said, "What did you do? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.

These are the words of our ancient tradition.

May the Living Word of God in Scripture be alive within us, among us, and beyond us.

Once upon a time, there were places called service stations where you would pull your car in, and a crew of uniformed people would come out to service your car. These station attendants filled up your gas tank and oil, even checked your tire pressure and washed your windshield.

There was a man who drove his car into one of these service stations with his wife. An attendant washed the windshield, but the man thought the window was still dirty and was annoyed. In an irritated tone, the man asked the attendant to wash it again. The attendant did so and the window still seemed dirty to this man. So now the man was really angry. He yelled at the attendant and was starting to get personal when his wife in a somewhat exasperated tone of her own said to the man, "Honey, clean your glasses!"

The man looked at his wife, took off his glasses, wiped them off, and then looked again at the windshield. Clean.

With sheepish embarrassment, he apologized to the attendant and drove away.

This story reminds us that not only how we see things matters, but that our own lenses of perception deeply affect how we see things and therefore how we respond to life. Becoming self-aware of our lenses, individual and collective, and shaping those lenses of perception faithfully is an essential part of evolving our faith, of maturing our psycho-spiritual life.

The late Roman Catholic monk and mystic Thomas Merton can be of assistance to us as we approach our perception of and response to life with the language of “True self and false self.” There is a deep soul dance of identity and orientation and even struggle with these two selves that is at the root of so many of the issues in our personal and collective lives. There is only time this morning to introduce this framework, but it is still worth naming and beginning the exploration.

Simply put, the false self is the usual expression of our ego self. It specializes in the separation story, working under the illusion that we are individuals on our own. The false self invests excessively in the particulars of separateness; where we came from, what we eat, who we like, what we like, who we know, what we do for a living. The false self cares a lot about what we and others think of us. Now the adjective *false* may be a bit unfair, too negative, because we all need a functioning ego and build it as we grow up. In fact, developing a secure enough ego is a first step in transcending it, in going past it. Much like how we keep a driver’s license, the ego self is important and handy for simple identification and cooperation out in everyday life, but the it won’t help much when we encounter the deep wounding or wonders of Life. Amidst birth and death, deep joy and deep loss, passion and confusion, the false and limited ego self cannot offer Wisdom or comfort or growth. It does not know the way to resurrection.

Yet, deeper than that, is another Self, what Merton calls the True Self. From his diary, we hear Merton’s description of perceiving through the lens of the True Self.

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. . . This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. . .

And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. . . . Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.

Merton goes on to describe the True Self,

... At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. ... It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.

And the cost and consequence of not connecting with and choosing from this True Self is significant. In our sacred mythic reading from the Book of Genesis, we picked up the story right after the primal earthlings have left Eden. The primal brother Cain experiences separation and alienation. Cain is frustrated and projects his own frustration outward such that he believes the false separation story that if he can just get rid of his brother, he will be rid of his own frustration and discomfort. This is the storytelling of the false self, the immature ego self. And so it goes with every mass shooter, every person who imagines and/or carries out violence. The false self is under the illusion of separateness, dealing in the world of projection and blame, reaction and fear, fragility and bitterness. While I don't think much of original sin as theology or church doctrine, this story of Cain is a worthy reminder that we all have the ever-present potential to go to this separating way of perceiving and storytelling. As the Divine Voice in the story says, "sin is waiting at the door" (Hebrew = lurking like a predator waiting to pounce).

But, of course, Genesis also has a previous story of blessing and connection, one that says we are of Divine Origin and that we are all from the same Sacred Source of Blessing, all imprinted with the Divine Image. That sacred Creation story is the origin of our True Self as Merton calls it. This Self is what the author of The Message version of the Bible, Eugene Peterson, would call a God-Created Self. When we are in touch with the True Self, perceiving from that place, our lives and our community change. We see differently and choose differently than Cain or the man in the story of the service station visit.

When we root our identity in the True Self, we cannot be an abuser or be abused.
When we root our identity in the True Self, we do not fear death, but embrace the life we have been given.
When we root our identity in the True Self, we can create new life out of chaos.
When we root our identity in the True Self, even in the face of loss of life and love we can find hope.
When we root our identity in the True Self, we can appreciate the courageous faithfulness of a Jewish person in hiding in Germany during World War II who scratched onto a wall...

*I believe in the sun, though it be dark;
I believe in God, though God be silent;
I believe in neighborly love, though it be unable to reveal itself.*

Touching into and living from our True Self is the deepest desire of all the prayers at Plymouth, prayers of song and speech, prayers of silence and reflection, prayers of marching and meditation. It is the deepest desire for all the groups that gather here for support and study, that gather to contemplate spiritually and to act faithfully.

If all we have available to our consciousness is the false self, Abel will continue to be left dead in the field and the earth will suffer. But if we courageously accept the invitation of faith to seek and serve that center of our being where the Divine meets us in the True Self, Divine Love will shine like the sun, and the earth and our lives will be resurrected and renewed.

May it be so. AMEN.