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Who Am I?

Who am I? What could be easier to answer? Of course to think about it, what could be harder?

I mean, I am me. But who is this “me?” I am a man, a son, a brother, a friend, a Jesuit, a professor of philosophy, a pastor of Our Lady of the Lake, a chaplain up at Schweitzer. I am a reader, a lover of film noir, a scrabble player, a collector of those state quarters. I am all these things, and much more. But how do I weave them all together into a single self? How do I avoid being pulled apart by all these different sides of myself, how do I not end up like a pile of puzzle pieces all over the floor, fragmented, diffuse, lurching from one thing to another, what is the golden thread by which I can stitch together all these parts of me into a whole multicolored dream-coat, my true self?

Medieval Christianity had a prayer that today we might find a little morbid. A moment of morbidly remembering that we are each going to die. In this prayer I imagine myself on my deathbed, looking back over my life. I ask myself what do I like in what I see and what do I regret? What do I look back over in satisfaction, even pride in what I have accomplished, what I have done for others, where I have created new life and purpose in the lives of others, what have I brought to birth? And on the other hand, what will I look back over with disappointment, where will I feel I have sold myself short, missed opportunities for doing more, being more? A priest who had been at many a deathbed once said that he had heard many a regret among the dying: not having spent enough time with loved ones, never having said to those who meant the world to them that they meant the world to them, or not having done so enough. But no one ever said to him that they regretted not having put more time in at work, or not having made more money.

Imagining ourselves on our deathbed can enable us to see our lives as a whole. It can take us out of the busy-ness of the moment and give us a broader perspective. Things that seem so large at the time, may appear small in the long run, and things that seem small, hardly with thinking about, can loom large overall.

In today's first reading we hear that God knows who we are from the get-go from our mother's womb. And that is the key. We may not know who we are, not fully, not honestly, not really, not ever, but God does. And if we can but unencumber ourselves even for a moment and just listen we can hear him teach us, call us to our true self.

Raimon Panikkar was a Spanish priest and theologian who lived much of his life in India studying Hinduism. He wrote about the affinities between the Gospel and the Upanishads. He wrote that the Upanishads taught him that the heart of Christianity is that we seek a personal relationship with God., an I-Thou relationship. Now today Athou@ sounds formal. But that=s

just because it is old English. What it means in old English is AYou@ not in the collective sense, or in the formal sense but in the singular, the “you” standing before me, whom I see face to face.

Nothing new yet. I already knew that. But then Panikkar continued, in this I-thou relationship, we are not the AI@, we are the Athou@ before God, whom He is seeing face to face. In other words, the most fundamental experience of God is relating to God as a thou, but experiencing God relating to me as his thou, his beloved, the apple of his eye, his girl. That is, when I look to God, I see God looking back, at me.

As Jesus rises from the waters at his baptism he has that kind of experience revealing to him who he truly is. He knows who he is not. He has figured that much out. He is not destined to be a construction worker for the rest of his life. When he goes to the Baptist I imagine him playing with his puzzle pieces, wondering how they all fit together. As he arises from the waters of the Jordan he learns. And notice, he does not *decide* who he will be, he is *told*, in a flash, in a single life defining moment. He hears the Father saying: AYou are my son, my beloved, in whom I am so pleased.@ Jesus learns that he is the Father=s “thou.”

As the recognition overwhelms Jesus, God=s Spirit descends upon him like a dove. A few years ago up here at Schwietzer I thought of a new image of how God can call us, less dramatic, more gentle. I imagined the Spirit=s descent upon me like the gently falling snow, lightly swirling around me, gradually accumulating at my feet, on my jacket, over my life. What is gathering around your feet? It may seem at times like the ash from Mt St. Helen=s 40 years ago now. But maybe its snow, snow we are mistaking for volcanic ash.

May we come to learn who we are. Not who we think we are, but who God sees when he looks at us. For God knows us better than we know ourselves. For God has known us longer than we have known ourselves, from our mother=s womb. May we come to feel that we too are God=s “thou”, his chosen son, his beloved daughter. And may God=s love for us fall softly about us, enveloping us, calling us to who he knows us to be.