

THEOLOGY is how we understand that God is active in the world. It is said that our first experience of theology is our family of origin. That is, we first experience “God in the world” as an extension of authority figures in our family, probably our father and mother, but other influential adults as well, such as doctors and teachers. We cling to the theology we accepted as a child: Jesus is the loving shepherd who blesses children, God is the all-knowing, all-powerful “guy up there,” the Holy Spirit an ever-present mystery. Spiritual development may be arrested at this stage. But eventually we realize that there is no “up” up there in heaven . . . that bad things happen to good people (and pets), including painful and unexpected death . . . that most of the planet’s people believe in some other deity, if they believe anything at all. And our childhood theology of how God is active in the world is a shambles. Most of us, I’d say, never pick up the pieces. It’s not worth the effort. We get by on the secular world-view we absorb from school, popular culture, and the media. During childhood our sense of self develops in stages, though Not Without a Struggle, as most of us know. In the first stage of childhood, we develop a sense of belonging and realize our dependency on parents and caregivers. Around age two, we test the idea that we are an independent self who can control our own life – and maybe control other lives, too. Jump ahead to the stage called adolescence.

The developmental work of the adolescent is to achieve an identity independent of our social location or family of origin. Next comes young adulthood, when the sense of **self** develops about as far as it ever will, unless one is really willing to work at it. With a little intentional planning, our **spiritual** identity develops in the same kind of stages as our sense of self. And goes off the rails in ways similar to self-development. To comprehend the fullness of God and all that God intends for our lives involves some thrashing around. Even Jesus, presumably, had to thrash spiritually. Having been born to a family of particular status in a particular place and time, Jesus, too, must have struggled to develop a sense of self individuated from his upbringing. The culture of those times did not recognize, much less value, the individuated self. Jesus grew up in a communal society. The patriarch gave the family its sense of identity, its sense of well-being, and its social standing. Today’s passage reflects that Jesus achieves a high level of personal – and spiritual – development. His pledge to pit family member against family member represents an extreme position against the mores of the times: he values spiritual independence above kinship. If what Jesus says startles us in this passage, perhaps it is because we ourselves have not reached our spiritual potential. Doesn’t Jesus still startle us when he says,

“If you deny me before people, I will deny you ...
 “I have not come to bring peace but a sword ...
 “Your foes will be members of your household ...
 “Anyone who does not take up his cross
 and follow is not worthy of me.”

I think most of us have to do some growing-up
 to identify with this spiritually-mature Jesus.
 Maturity happens Not Without a Struggle.

The Struggle to Develop a Spiritual Self

The Swiss student of human behavior,
 psychologist Carl Jung (who died in 1961)
 made spiritual maturity one of his hallmark studies.
 Among 20th century scientists

Jung was the rare one
 who took the Christian faith seriously.
 His work in the area of spirituality and personality
 bridged the scientific and religious world-views.
 He was convinced that spiritual health
 and mental health were two sides of the same coin.

What I find pertinent to our gospel text today
 is Jung’s description of an individual’s **self**.

Jung’s **self** is short-hand for all the factors
 that determine each unique personality.

Development of the Jungian **self** –
 that is, one’s distinct personality –
 is the lifelong work of every human being.

For our purposes today, I’m going to equate **self**
 with what the Greek New Testament calls *psychē*.

Psychē is often translated into English as “soul.”

We heard *psychē* this morning:

“Do not fear those who can destroy the body
 but cannot destroy the soul (*psychē*).”

Substitute **self** for *psychē* in the same sentence:

“Do not fear those who can destroy the body
 but cannot destroy the **self**.”

I think **self** opens up another dimension
 of what Jesus is talking about.

Psyche is an aspect of our created being,
 whereas soul suggests something in the afterlife.

Alternatively, *psychē* can be translated as “life.”

That’s what we hear in the last verse:

“Those who find their life (*psyche*) will lose it,
 and those who lose their life (*psyche*)
 for my sake will find it.”

I would substitute **self** for *psychē* here as well.
 Back to this later.

Self adds to the meaning of both “soul” and “life”
 the idea of something that starts in disorder
 and approaches but never attains perfect order.

Work on one’s **self** begins at birth
 (maybe even before birth)

and is never finished, perhaps not even at death.

A theologian who studied Carl Jung
 once made the comment,

“One can live with unordered **self** throughout life,
 yet still be considered successful.”

That might describe the ex-CEO of Uber,
 or our current commander-in-chief.

The Jesus we meet in today’s text
 is the epitome of the well-ordered self,
 though he is never “successful” in a worldly sense.
 He has a grasp of his life’s distinct purpose
 and confidently carries on to that end.

So he can say, to go back to his closing words:

“Those who find their self will lose it” –
 and those who lose their self on account of me
 will find it;”

that is, those who define **self** in terms of
 possessions, status, occupation, family –
 will lose their worldly identity in the end.

But the **self** that develops into discipleship
 will attain an eternal identity in Jesus.

The mark of developed Christian faith
 is **discipleship**.

If you develop a sense of self as a disciple,
 you will always be tracked with God’s GPS –
 God who numbers the hairs on your head

will keep you on track for eternal life, just as God keeps track of Ishmael and his mother, Hagar. A disciple “takes up Jesus’ cross and follows.” To be mature in faith, we need to accept both the shame and the glory of the cross: the cross provides us meaning, purpose, and identity. Our gospel lesson represents a convergence of **self** and **discipleship**. Just as adolescence is the struggle to form a **self** independent of location or family, **discipleship** is the struggle to follow Jesus, independent of past bonds of location or kinship. “For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. One’s foes will be members of one’s own household.” Discipleship, Jesus is saying, is a **self** informed and shaped by the kind of struggles that Jesus faces. In his itinerant ministry, Jesus is subjected to name-calling, insults, rejection, punishment, and poverty. Just so, Jesus sends those first disciples, once they become apostles, into the world like lambs to the wolves. They develop quickly but Not Without a Struggle.

Presumptively we live in a Christian culture. What wolves do we face? What spiritual struggles shape the **selves** we are working on today? Let me mention several:

- One of the strongest human needs is to be recognized: accepted, noticed, remembered. Recognition can be such a struggle that it arrests spiritual development.

Another one:

- Deep in every self is a longing to belong. This can be a lifelong preoccupation for many.

Witness the booming popularity of Facebook, where like-minded people can connect virtually.

- Teenage gangs promise disaffected young people a powerful identity to present to the world and a sense of family that may be missing at home.

Another:

- One of the toughest roadblocks to spiritual development is physical dependency, be it to drugs, tobacco, alcohol, sex, or smut. This is a big, bad wolf for a great many people. But spirituality is one way to combat dependency.
- Then there is our national xenophobia exacerbated by the threat of terrorism. Not content to let God number the hairs on heads, we rely on full-body x-rays that penetrate clothing to reveal bad guys’ concealed weapons; and street cameras with facial-recognition software to spot undesirables.

Here’s another spiritual struggle:

- Commercialism, consumerism, and materialism – these have become virtual religions. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has developed his invention into a virtual place where users congregate around common interests. Last week, Zuckerberg announced a new mission: to save humanity from the social isolation of the physical world. That mission reminds me of 1984, a year of historic promise, when Coca-Cola introduced the jingle:

“I’d like to teach the world to sing
in perfect harmony.
I’d like to buy the world a Coke
and keep it company.”

Coke promised peace without a struggle! Sorry, but there is no perfect harmony, no matter how much Coca-Cola the world drinks. The struggle involved in spiritual development is to differentiate from the world (including family).

The fruit of discipleship is a relationship with God that becomes deeper and richer and stronger than any worldly relationship.

As we develop a robust theology,

Not Without a Struggle,

but hopefully without fear,

we will identify who we are as God's creatures – that is, to whom we belong.

Psychology, Jungian or otherwise,

can merely describe and explain

how the self matures.

At best, psychology hints

at possible mid-life corrections.

But THEOLOGY describes (and prescribes)

a way of relating to creation and to the Creator.

Psychology may be our life's radar –

but theology is the flight plan.

Theology engages the ultimate human issues of meaning, purpose and destiny.

CONCLUSION

God's kingdom has overcome many obstacles already.

What are the odds that 12 inexperienced apostles would succeed at evangelizing the world?

God actually used the obstacles the 12 faced to further God's kingdom.

It turns out that the very obstacles

the apostles struggled with,

such as persecution and rejection,

proved to be spurs to discipleship.

The Gospel spread back then.

It will spread now.

It was received as good news back then.

It is good news now.

And, thank God, humankind may accept it, but Not Without a Struggle.

Amen.