

Fr. Perozich comments —

- ***One of the great gifts of conversion to Catholicism was that it liberated me from the tedious and futile project of self-invention.***
- ***juvenile imitation of the story our culture never tires of telling itself: the one about the kid whose individuality had been somehow suppressed, and who then learned to find his voice and “speak his truth.”***
- ***This is the state of the synod on synodality, kids who have jettisoned the revealed faith in order to express their individuality and to speak their “truth” rather than Jesus’ TRUTH. [RP]***
- ***the faith reveals human identity as it exists, objectively, in relation to the Creator.***
- ***In the New Testament, in particular, we are offered clues about true human identity as it exists in relation to God in the person of Jesus Christ. In the wide and varied swath of characters who appear alongside Christ or feature in His parables, we recognize pieces of ourselves, and through their experiences, we discern key truths about the differences between man and God.***
- ***This is our true identity: In our brokenness, we wander astray. But we are never stranded. We are endlessly chased. We are endlessly loved. That’s certainly better than anything I could have come up with on my own.***

Finding Our Real Identity

Peter Laffin February 12, 2023

One of the great gifts of conversion to Catholicism was that it liberated me from the tedious and futile project of self-invention. As a self-styled “serious atheist” who took *himself* painfully seriously, I saw unbelief

in God to its logical end: a world without God is without objective values of any kind. Accordingly, the individual is a blank slate upon which anything can be painted. Having also swallowed the common postmodern platitudes about the romance of self-invention, I rolled up my sleeves and got to work on the project of “me” with a rare verve.

But that was all a juvenile imitation of the story our culture never tires of telling itself: the one about the kid whose individuality had been somehow suppressed, and who then learned to find his voice and “speak *his* truth.” It left me bitter, beaten, and ultimately bored.

Hollywood makes this stale story look glamorous on the silver screen with slow-mo shots that sync up with the soundtrack. But in real life, the project of self-invention is spotted with unglamorous phases that the movies cleverly skip. Crafting one’s own identity from scratch is anxiety-ridden, stifling, and limiting. It’s the opposite of the soul-expanding adventure of discovering one’s role within the grand story of the cosmos.

This is a tragically untapped angle in American Catholic evangelizing: The Church offers the promise of adventure to a world bored to tears of its own iPhone reflection.

Rather than encourage the delusion of self-creation – as if we were powerful enough to create ourselves or even alter the substance of our souls – the faith reveals human identity as it exists, objectively, in relation to the Creator.

In the New Testament, in particular, we are offered clues about true human identity as it exists in relation to God in the person of Jesus Christ. In the wide and varied swath of characters who appear alongside Christ or feature in His parables, we recognize pieces of ourselves, and through their experiences, we discern key truths about the differences between man and God.

If we read the Gospels not simply as an academic exercise but as a chance to live through the eyes of its characters, we repeatedly experience something like *déjà vu*. Their encounters with the Divine cause an unsettling feeling of being shaken awake from a long haze. In proximity to the Light of Christ, an individual is utterly exposed. Christ’s presence yanks away the trapdoor of the ego, and we are propelled into a state of unblinking self-awareness.

The individual characters of the Gospels stand out to us according to the changing seasons of the heart. When we find ourselves sad to let go of our earthly treasures for the sake of eternity, we identify with the rich young man. When we ache from the open wound of unrepaired sin, we identify with the woman at the well. When we are tempted to abdicate the

responsibilities of our earthly power, we even find ourselves identifying with Pontius Pilate.

Indeed, even animal characters are capable of conveying fundamental truths about the nature of created beings in relation to the nature of God. In fact, no Gospel character revealed more to me about my true nature than the titular character from the Parable of the Lost Sheep.

The superficial similarities I shared with the Lost Sheep leaped off the page. For one, I'd always considered myself too individualistic to run with the herd. Instead, I'd often dashed into the dark woods on an impulse, if only to prove that I'm in control and don't need anyone's help or approval. The Lost Sheep was, as the neo-pagans like to say, my "spirit animal."

But, as ever, the story only becomes interesting when God begins to move. In an utterly irrational and desperate act, the shepherd – i.e., the Lord – abandons the rest of his flock, the ninety-nine who haven't strayed, in order to pursue the one that did. The shepherd's heart suffers so much from the disappearance of a single beloved sheep that he flings himself recklessly into a rescue mission.

The reader (this reader anyway) is stunned by the shepherd's seeming irresponsibility. In human logic, it doesn't seem right that the well-being of one should take precedence over the well-being of many. It also doesn't make sense that a shepherd should act against his own self-interest. Shouldn't he be concerned with maintaining the overall value of his flock?

What makes the parable even stranger is that, elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus tells us to be as perfect as our heavenly Father. Not only is this meant to reveal our identity in relation to God, but also to offer us a model for our conduct. Would the Lord really have us imitate the shepherd in similar circumstances?

The parable doesn't compute in human terms and isn't meant to. His ways are above our ways, after all. His love has a logic all its own.

If we close our eyes and allow the Light of His love to wash over us, we quickly realize that, against all reason, it's obviously true. All of it. God is recklessly chasing after each of us as we race through the valley of the shadow of death, down the dark paths and deep woods that we enter through our own ignorance and stubbornness.

He pursues us because He is love and we are His beloved. He is passionately involved with each of us as if we were His only. And like a good parent, He will endure anything and give everything in order to see us safely return home. His goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives.

This is our true identity: In our brokenness, we wander astray. But we are never stranded. We are endlessly chased. We are endlessly loved. That's certainly better than anything I could have come up with on my own.

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