

Unleavening the Ego

A homily preached by Jennifer A. Hudson at St. Paul's on the Green Episcopal Church, April 26, 2018

Exodus 13: 3-9 and Luke 4: 17-21

“[I]n order to be, never try to seem.” Some great advice from philosopher Albert Camus.

It's hard to avoid seeming, to live authentically, when we live in a culture that demands conformity to its own images and definitions of who and what we must be in order to be valued. And sometimes we do our best to seem, to conform. Take, for instance, social media. We make idols of ourselves on it the way others do. We'll post selfies and stories to show off our new car, our figures, or where we're visiting, then fret over how many friends or followers we gain or lose. The emphasis is “me, me, me.” I have nice things. I'm beautiful. I go places. I rub elbows with this one. We may not realize just how much keeping up with the Joneses can chain us to a distorted sense of who we are, who we are meant to be, and wherein lies our value.

The Good News is that our value lies not in what we might narcissistically project of ourselves to the world, but in the very fact that we are God's beloved children—just as we've been created. Without the masks. Without seeming.

Tonight's passages from Exodus and Luke show a God who liberates through an “unleavening” or deflation of the ego. God delivers the Israelites not only from Egypt, but also the stuff of Egypt—the idols, the self-indulgent behaviors. Jesus delivers humanity from spiritual poverty by exemplifying a new way of love, compassion, and humility. Jesus shows us the truth of who we are and who we are called to become—a spiritual self that is one with God and with each other.

Sister Joan Chittister, in her book *Radical Spirit: 12 Ways to Live a Free and Authentic Life*, offers ways, in an era of what she terms “pathological individualism,” to break free from the narcissism that shackles us and makes us lose touch with the true self. She emphasizes the need for a return to humility, to a God-centered life, through acknowledging our faults, removing our masks, seeking wisdom, listening more attentively to each other, and

thinking before speaking. As Sister Joan writes: “The word *humility* itself—meaning ‘of the earth’—makes the point. We are not to make ourselves gods [...] Our role in life is to do God’s will for humankind (189).” In other words, the emphasis becomes not “me” but “we,” and the authentic self, stripped of ego and isolation, is included in this “we,” this partnership, this something greater.

When we humble ourselves, when we lay down our masks and stop seeming, when we surrender the false self (the ego) to turn to something beyond our individualistic selves, that’s when we find who we truly are. We rise into a fuller life. We find liberation. After all, isn’t that, in part, what the Easter story is all about? It can be our story too.

So the next time we post on Instagram, let’s not fret over how many likes or followers we accrue. Our value is immeasurable. And God is always our biggest fan.