

Sermon: The Lies We Tell
Scripture: John 18: 18-40
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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The Christian spiritual teacher, writer and priest, Henri Nouwen, once wrote that we all find ourselves bouncing around three very human lies that we tell ourselves and that cause us no end of trouble. These lies are:

I am what I have.

I am what I do.

I am what others say or think about me.

What I have is a large family or I have a good job. I might have a lovely home in a safe neighborhood. I have the various accouterments that make life easier and comfortable and this is me.

What I do is work a good job or I'm a competent professional. What I do is give to charity and so I am generous or I am basically a nice guy and a decent father, I am what I do and this is me.

I am what others think of me - and others think of me as accomplished or trustworthy or intelligent or a good Christian, or hard working and this is me.

I am what I have.

I am what I do.

I am what others say or think about me.

And these are the lies we tell. We spend the whole first half of our lives building these things up and "making a life for ourselves" which is necessary and sensible but what almost every spiritual path from the

great world religions tell us in one form or another is that the over-identification of ourselves with what we do and have and what others say about us is the surest and greatest obstacle to the development of our deeper and truer selves. To say I am what I have or do or what others say about me and to pursue those things as an end in themselves is to deceive oneself. The writer and monk Thomas Merton referred to what we build as the False Self, the famous cultural Anthropologist Ernest Becker calls it “the vital lie”, Buddhists call it the Impermanent Self, and in Christian theology it’s a way of understanding what is meant by our Original Sin– that we all have this inherent devotion or addiction to the propping up of our small ego self when we are truly something much greater and more vast, made for much broader horizons. “We are,” as the Franciscan writer Richard Rohr names it, “a unique aspect of the infinite mystery of God.”* SO much more than

What we have and

What we do and

What others say or think about us.

You remember we began Lent by considering the scripture where Jesus is tempted by the devil in the wilderness? That is Jesus coming to terms with these very human lies. Remember, in the Gospel of John, Jesus refers to the devil as “the Father of Lies”, and these three lies, we can assume, are some of the devil’s favorite children. I am what I do – “here, Jesus, turn these stones into bread. Show us what you can do!” I am what I have – “worship me,” the devil says, “and I’ll give you the kingdoms of this world.” I am what others say about me – “if you are the Son of God, as people say, then throw yourself down from this pinnacle

and you will not be hurt.”** Then his temptations end with the ominous phrase – “and then the devil left him until an opportune time.”

Well, sure enough, the opportune time comes on Palm Sunday as Jesus enters Jerusalem. Everyone is SO excited about Jesus coming and everyone is talking about his miracles and his teachings, the way he bested the most scholarly rabbis, the way he’s gathered huge crowds of people and inspired and energized them. He is a SUPERSTAR, this Jesus Christ! He IS what he’s been doing and everyone is talking about it! That is until he comes into Jerusalem on a donkey and turns the money tables over in the temple and doesn’t defend himself but goes as a lamb to the slaughter without igniting any kind of revolution? Then it’s no longer “hooray Jesus is the best!” but rather “crucify him!”

Cause that’s the fickle nature of our False Selves. When we lose our job that we over-identified with or we make a terrible mistake and the nice guy image that we believed was who we were crumbles down or our children have serious problems and those around us say bad things about us, then we suddenly become painfully aware just how flimsy and problematic the lies are that we tell ourselves. If Jesus was determined, like all of us are, by what he did or had or what others said about him, he never would have entered Jerusalem.

Within just a few days, he will stand before Pilate and respond to Pilate’s question about whether he is a king or not by saying,

“The reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth.” And Pilate will say in all his power and control before he walks away from him:

“What is truth?”

Spoken out of the False Self, spoken by the son of the Father of Lies to the Son of God – what is truth, anyway - And that reverberates, does it not, down through the ages?! The man in power, the people in charge, saying “what is truth?”

“You have your truth, I have my truth. You have your facts, I have my facts.” And the Father of Lies, licks his chops, and eats it up!

Picture it for a moment, even if it’s a stereotypical image from movies or paintings, picture Jesus standing before Pilate; Jesus, in a simple robe and sandals – an image of the True Self - standing in the great halls of Roman power before Pilate in his royal garb and high throne – an image of the False Self - the Son of God standing vulnerable and true before the son of the Father of Lies.

I am what I have - Jesus standing there HAS nothing - he is homeless, owns nothing, has no job.

I am what I do - Jesus standing there DOES nothing – he barely defends himself, he offers no miracle to justify himself, he’s contributing nothing to society but accused of being a rabble rouser, a criminal.

I am what others think about me - and Jesus by the time he’s standing there has no any longer thinking much of anything about him but that he’s an embarrassment, a loser, a fool!

And yet we know, not just from how the story is written but in our heart of hearts, we know that He is True and that the propped up, power-filled, greatly-feared human king Pilate is the one to be pitied.

And that’s the scene I invite you to take with you into Holy Week. It is a snapshot of your own soul. Right there within you, you have your False Self, your own little Roman Tyrant, your own little Pilate, who

holds out to sustain “the vital lie” that you are what you do and have and what others say about you.

But, praise the Lord, you also have within you, much deeper and more enduring, much stronger and waiting to emerge, you have Christ-within you, your True Self that has never been determined by what you have and do and what others say about you.

So in fact, HOORAY and HOSANNA for those times when there is a collapsing of your false Self, the lost job or the embarrassing mistake or the humiliating experience. Bring it on, though the ego says “nooooo!!!!” The sooner we come to understand and doubt that such things are really who we are, the better... for really what we are is a unique and beautiful aspect of the infinite mystery of God.

**This quote comes from “The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective” by Andreas Ebert and Richard Rohr.*

***This explanation of Jesus’ temptations based on Nouwen’s three lies comes from Christopher Heuertz’s “The Sacred Enneagram: Finding Your Unique Path to Spiritual Growth.”*