

## THE COURAGE TO BE!

In life, there are opportunities “to be” and opportunities “to become.” I’m not here to offer anything like a comprehensive statement on these modes of existence, but I do think some generalizations can be advanced on the basis of today’s readings from Scripture. “To be” is an act of surrender and embrace. This is who God made me to be and I’m going to run with it. This is my place in God’s plan right now and I’m all in. I’m ready just to be. In spiritual circles, at least, “to become” is something entirely different. When we’re set on becoming rather than being, we can stray from God’s plan and travel off in our own direction; with self-created desires and hungers and aspirations driving the bus until we become, become those desires and those hungers and those aspirations. One might say in very general and provisional terms that “being” is the realm of saints and “becoming” is the realm of sinners. Saints trust in God’s wisdom and support; looking and listening for their Lord and following after him once he’s been heard and/or seen. Sinners defer not to their Lord, but to the personal and the popular; in the end becoming the image of the personal or the popular rather than the image of God.

This tension between “being” and “becoming” animates much of the recorded history of Jesus Christ. When Jesus receives the Holy Spirit, on the day of his baptism say Matthew, Mark, and Luke, on no particular day in John, Jesus receives all that he needs to be the person he’s been sent into the world to be. Once he’s been equipped in this way, the question becomes: Will Jesus play ball or not? Will he in his prayers and in his words and in his deeds, say to his Father in heaven, “Your will, not mine?” Or will Jesus say to his Father in heaven, “My will, not yours.” Here lies the difference between being and becoming for Christians like you and me. Here often lies the difference between living as a saint and living as a sinner.

As might be expected, we can pick up on Jesus’ personal version of the struggle between being and becoming in today’s reading from John. In this reading, Jesus is in the middle of the action. He’s out and about with the people; in a position to tend to their needs and to supply that which a sinful and self-serving world hasn’t supplied. This is right where Jesus is supposed to be if he’s to be the person he’s been sent into the world to be. When Jesus follows the Spirit’s lead, when Jesus trusts in the wisdom and support of God, he is who God has called and equipped him to be—the Bread of the World, the Light of the World, the Good Shepherd, the True Vine, the Way, the Life, and the Truth. Being this

person, being this person rather than becoming someone else, is mighty special. With plenty of leftovers remaining, Jesus is able to satisfy the deepest hungers of a throng of humanity with just five loaves and two fish. It's something Jesus continues to do today with the simple bread and wine of holy communion.

But you know, holy communion wouldn't be what it is today and has long been if Jesus had given in to the temptation to become, to become someone else. After all, once he had been the Bread of World for those gathered, today's reading from John tells us those who had been fed wanted to make Jesus their king. Thank goodness Jesus resisted this temptation to become someone else. Thank goodness Jesus waited for God to make him King of kings and Lord of lords on the day of his resurrection from the dead. It's why Jesus still is today who he came to be initially—the Bread of the World, the Light of the World, the Good Shepherd, the True Vine, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. It's what happens when we live out the surrender and the embrace of being rather than the revolt and the rebellion of becoming. We end up with way more than we do when we give in to the popular and the personal; when we give in to the temptation to become someone other than the person God has called and equipped us to be.

Now if Jesus is the positive example of this truth, then King David is its negative manifestation in our reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel. As compared to Uriah the Hittite, David knows too much about becoming and too little about being. At the time of the episode recorded by our first reading, Uriah is to be a soldier in David's army under the command of Joab. David can't get him to become someone else no matter how hard he tries. The time may come for Uriah to go back to being a husband, but right now he is to be a soldier in David's army under the command of Joab. If only David had been this resolute, this faithful, this comfortable with his God-given station in life, but he wasn't. Rather than being the king of Israel as God had anointed him to be, rather than being the shepherd of the sheep, David seeks to become intimate with someone else's wife and ends up becoming a murderer in the attempt to cover his tracks. This is how it goes when we seek to become someone other than the person God has called and equipped us to be. It doesn't work. We end up worse than we were before. When we find the courage to be, in the process breaking free from the often sinful impulse to become, our reading from Ephesians is right. Trusting in the wisdom and support of God, we accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.

I think of our mutual call to build up the Body of Christ. God calls and equips all of us to encourage and to equip one another; to comfort and to console

one another; to invite and welcome others into this fellowship or another one like it. This requires a lot of things to come together at the right time and in the right fashion. Building up the Body of Christ is about being on time and about being your God-given self. Building up the Body of Christ is all about marrying perfect timing with real and genuine authenticity. You don't want to say or to do too little. You don't want to say or to do too much. You don't want to say or to do it too late or too early. And whatever you do or say, you want to be totally real about it; using no script other than the one God has been writing for you throughout your life and during each of its moment. See how important and powerful it is to be your God-given self rather than to try to become somebody else. The New Testament tells us that God really couldn't get through to us until God came to be, came to be one of us. Successful communication on the part of God is going to be no different today. To be heard, to be felt, to get across, at just the right time, we'll need to be the person God has been calling and equipping us to be since the day of our baptism through the ongoing efforts of the Holy Spirit. And how do we arrive at this state of being; at this incredibly powerful mix of perfect timing and authenticity?

As it often does, our hymnal gives us the answer. Let me illustrate by way of reference to my mother Janice. On the day my father died, my mom was still teaching, while my dad had retired from teaching the year before. When my dad was found dead in his truck on the way to a medical appointment, with the truck in gear and my dad's foot somehow holding down the brake, with all of this happening in the driveway of what was to be my parents' retirement home, the authorities contacted the office at Friendship Learning Center; the elementary school in North Fond du Lac, Wisconsin where my mom taught and where I completed kindergarten and later the fourth grade as well. As the principal called her out of her classroom for the twenty minute drive home, my mother knew what awaited wasn't likely to be good. In the midst of what was likely to be bad, who should she be? What should she do or say? What would the future hold for her? My mom didn't know how to answer any of these questions so she sang a hymn she had known since childhood; a hymn that showed up in our denomination's "With One Voice" hymnal and then later in its "Evangelical Lutheran Worship" hymnal. Wanting to remain faithful, wanting to be her God-given self at a new and challenging moment, my mom sang, "Precious Lord, take my hand." Once again she proved to be a pretty smart lady. For here's the thing. If we sing and pray, "Precious Lord, take my hand" as if it were the song of our life, more often than not, at just the right time, we'll end up being the person God has

been calling and equipping us to be since the day of baptism through the Holy Spirit. Amen!