

What Jesus says today makes me think of what I've been reading from Thomas Merton. Merton was one of the sources of guidance to which I turned during my sabbatical last year, and the way he reads and interprets Scripture has helped me to think of things on a whole new level.

Jesus says that whoever wishes to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses it for his sake will save it. I can't help but notice that the Greek word used here is the word *psyche*, which is the source of our English word 'psyche.' Unlike in English, *psyche* doesn't mean just refer to the mental or psychological part of a person, but it's different than the word "life" in general. It does refer to that something that animates us, makes us more than just lumps of meat and bone. It's what makes me specifically me. In some other contexts, the same word gets translated "soul" or "self."

I think of Merton today because he writes quite a bit about our concept of self. Our self, our concept of who we are, is a construct. Merton realizes this. It's made up of all the things we know about ourselves and the perspectives through which we see the world around us. Our self is made up of things like our personality, our likes and dislikes, our gender identity and expression, our sexual orientation, our personal philosophy or political affiliation, our nationality, our race... things like that.

But what Merton points out is that none of these things are *me*. They are all things *about* me. The true me, who I actually am, is somewhere beneath that. We often conflate the two, confusing this constructed person for our true self, but that is an illusion, he says. The man that I have constructed from all these bits of information and personality, that is not a man God knows, he says, because God didn't create him.¹ I did. The person God created is beneath all that. The person God created is the one that God knows and knows intimately. This is my True self.

I've found great wisdom in this, and it helps me make sense of the world in a new way. But what I want to tell you about today is my reading partner. I brought my copy of "The New Seeds of Contemplation" today. It is a pre-owned book, and the previous owner inscribed their name in the cover: "R. Ferguson." As I've been reading New Seeds, R. Ferguson has been my companion. They've recorded several epiphanies and questions in

the margins, and I've come to know them a little bit from what they found important enough to underline.

From the handwriting, I can guess that R. Ferguson is a woman, probably younger. I've taken to calling her "Rachel." Some of the things she writes and the words she uses makes me think she comes from a non-denominational or fundamentalist background. I've appreciated seeing her get excited when Merton talks about getting to know God more fully, and her questions.

She begins with lots of underlines and stars and exclamation points, but as the book draws on, I see her beginning to push back against him. She leaves more question marks and fewer stars. She records more questions that seem to have a sense of grief in them. At one point, when Merton writes about finding holiness, she writes, "NO! We can never become or experience God's holiness this side of heaven. Christ's holiness/righteousness is declared unto us."

What intrigues me most about Rachel today, however, is the note she left in chapter 9. Merton writes, "Therefore, when you and I become what we are really meant to be, we will discover not only that we love one another perfectly but that we are both living in Christ and Christ in us, and we are all One Christ. We will see that it is he who loves in us."ⁱⁱ According to Merton, when we let go of our false selves and consent to be who God created us to be in our truest selves, we find that our True Self, at the core of each of us, is Christ; or as St. Paul puts it, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Merton recognizes that if it is Christ who lives in each of us, then we are all of us One Person.

It is at this point that Rachel writes this: "So do we lose our sense of person or individuality in heaven?" When I read her question, perhaps I'm projecting, but I hear loss and disappointment. It's the same loss and disappointment I hear from Peter today in St. Mark's story. Jesus seems to know that his personal life, his *psyche*, is unimportant because he lives in all people and all people live in him. I wonder if this is why he seems to shun the title "Messiah" when Peter says it, and prefers instead "Son of Man," which simply means "human one."

Jesus may be able to let go of his self, his *psyche*, but Peter is not. Peter loves Jesus as he is and doesn't want to lose him. And so, when Jesus starts talking about suffering and dying, Peter tries to talk him out of it. It may also be that Peter has a bit more at stake here than his friend's life. He may be concerned about how this will sound to all the people who expect the Messiah to ride in on a white horse and deliver them from the Romans and Make Judea Great Again. Maybe that's part of why he tries to shut down Jesus' talk of suffering and dying.

Jesus knows that those expectations are not his. They belong to all the other people who have thoughts and feelings about what Messiah is and what Messiah does. Those expectations and desires and earnest hopes are part of a self, a *psyche*, that does not belong to him, a self that God did not create and does not know. If people—if we—are ever to understand what he has come to tell us, we need to be able to let go of that false self so we can see the truth of who God is.

When Jesus asks that question, “What can a person give in return for their self?” I hear two questions. The first is a question of priority: what are we each willing to give for our life? What are we willing to give up to save or preserve our sense of self? When the rubber meets the road, what are we willing to part with? But also, to what lengths will we go to save ourselves? Are we willing to take from another? To oppress or do violence? Are we willing to kill to save our life? And is that what God calls us to?

The false self, our sense of who we are defined by all these things unique to us, needs to die in order for the true self to be saved. History has shown that we are willing to commit terrible atrocities in order to save ourselves from those we deem threats. But what is the cost of our “salvation?” Or, as Jesus says, “What does it profit a person to gain the whole world and forfeit their soul?” If our souls, our true selves, are to be saved from being lost down a path of defensiveness and mistrust and hatred, the false self we would preserve must be allowed to die.

This is where the second question becomes interesting. When Jesus asks, “What can a person give in return for their self?” I also hear it as a rhetorical question. The answer, of course, is nothing! There is nothing we can give for our life, or our self, because those

things have already been given. They are gifts of God, unasked for and unearned. That we should feel the need to grasp and hoard what God gives so freely is an irony! It's like the Israelites hoarding manna in the wilderness: utter nonsense, and ultimately futile.

I wonder if this is what Jesus hopes he can help us to see: that the gifts of God have already been given us, even if we can't see them. Peter—Peter who has faithfully followed and truly seen who Jesus is—even Peter can't see that the true gift is in front of him. The true gift is the cross. It is the ability to follow Jesus in letting go of the false selves that so often enslave us to our own self-preservation and to be free; truly free to live life that is not constantly overshadowed by fear and the need to exert power over and against one another.

When Peter rightly states who Jesus is, Jesus immediately starts talking about what it means to be the Messiah, but that's not what Peter expects or wants. Peter wants a Messiah who will save the souls of God's people, even at the expense of the souls of the Romans or the Greeks or whoever else might try to conquer them. He rebukes Jesus because he is not ready for this truth.

Rachel, too, it seems, was not ready for this truth. She never made it to the next chapter. That plaintive question was one of the last things she wrote in Merton's book before she set it down, never to take it up again. No more underlines, no more stars, no more questions or rebukes. She could not follow any further.

Is our sense of self so important to us that we would let it keep us from following Jesus in the way of the cross? Are we so attached to our own experience of who we are that we would turn away from the Messiah? Or are we able to let go of the masks that we've constructed for ourselves and follow Jesus into a fuller experience of who God is?

I wonder if Jesus chose to be known not as God's Messiah, the one expected to ride the white horse, but as the Son of Man, the "human one," so that all the other sons and daughters of humanity might also be able to look and see for ourselves that our individual lives—our *psyches*—are nothing but a tiny part of the big life God has given us to share. I wonder if he was willing to let go of his own life, not because we needed a blood debt to be paid, but so that we could see for ourselves that the loss of a self, a *psyche*, is not the same as the loss of the eternal life God has already given us.

If we really do share this one life with all of creation—not just the other sons and daughters of humanity—if all people and all creatures really are One Person, Christ, alive in God, what does that look like? What does that free us to let go of? What does it free us to take up? Maybe we would see that there is nothing to save, nothing to preserve, nothing to subdue or submit to, nothing to exploit except our own self—God’s own self—staring at us in the faces of every living thing God has created.

ⁱ Merton, “The New Seeds of Contemplation,” 34

ⁱⁱ *ibid*, 65