

## The You of You

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Lectionary Readings: *Acts 4:5-12; I John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18; Psalm 23*

I've titled this homily "The You of You". Other titles I considered included "The Real You" and "Which You is Really You?" and "Will the Real You Stand Up?" These titles make it sound like I'm going to be preaching to you, but really I'll be preaching to me. I'm hoping that what I need to hear is something that will resonate with you, too.

There's a phenomenon that's been puzzling me lately. I'll give you an example. For the past eight years I have awakened every single night, usually two to four hours after I go to sleep. I wake up in the middle of some thought, or sometimes the tail end of a dream, and I go through a process of realizing that I was just having a dream and that I am now awake in my bed. I become aware that, while I've been asleep, I've been thinking thoughts about something for some time and I'm just now becoming consciously aware that I've been thinking those thoughts. Quite often, I've been replaying some conversation or interaction I had with someone the day before. Very shortly thereafter, however, my consciousness just slips back into auto-pilot, replaying the conversation or interaction; that is, I'm no longer aware *that* I'm replaying yesterday's conversation. I'm just doing it without any conscious awareness *that* I'm doing it. And then, maybe 30 minutes or an hour later, I become consciously aware that my mind's been running on auto-pilot for that stretch of time.

At this point, I usually remind myself that I've been awake way too long, that I need to stop rehashing yesterday's business or worrying about tomorrow's challenges so I can get back to sleep soon. I actually say to myself: "Todd, it's time to stop thinking and get to sleep. So, get up, go to the bathroom, get a drink of water, and get back to sleep." Now here's an interesting thing:

Although I order myself to get up and start my going-back-to-sleep process, can you guess what really happens? Usually I stay in bed and my mind continues to wander on auto-pilot for a while. Sometimes I have to order myself to get up three or four times before I actually do it.

I'm curious: how many of you can personally relate to something like this? What the heck is going on here? What's wrong with us? I'm not so much concerned with the psychological or physiological causes of this behavior. I'm concerned with what it implies about me as a personal self. Which one of these conscious beings is me? Am I the one who's on auto-pilot, replaying my past interactions with people, or am I the one who becomes conscious that I've been on auto-pilot and then starts attempting to steer myself into more productive behavior?

I'd like to think that I'm the meta-conscious-me, the one who becomes aware of auto-pilot-me and tries to direct him to better behavior. But, if I'm honest, I have to admit that auto-pilot-me is very powerful. He is very resistant to allowing meta-conscious-me to get control over what I'm doing.

There are lots of other examples of divided consciousness. Highway drivers sometimes come to a sudden awareness that they've been driving for miles on auto-pilot. This is called "highway hypnosis". Has this ever happened to you? All of a sudden you find yourself 5 or 10 miles farther down the road than you expected to be. You can't remember driving over that distance, but you've obviously been doing it successfully. This sounds crazy: there is a thinking you who has been navigating the highway without your being aware that you've been doing it!

Or consider temptation. You've decided to stop eating sweets after supper, but then you really want that chocolate chip cookie. You tell yourself, "Remember, now, you're not going to eat sweets at night anymore." There's the you who wants to stop eating sweets at night, and at the very same time there's the you who wants that chocolate chip cookie *right now*.

Sometimes a temptation is much more consequential, like when a drug addict struggles with himself to decide whether to take the drug. The meta-conscious addict wants very badly not to take the drug, but the addict's auto-pilot desire is overwhelming. The addict is of two minds, and the result is often shame and regret. Or, to consider a more universal example: how about when you decide to stop scrolling through your social media app for hours at a time only to find yourself doing it again just after you've told yourself you're not going to do it.

These are all examples of a divided consciousness, some kind of separation that is internal to the self. When the separation has bad consequences, we feel divided within ourselves, as the Apostle Paul did when he exclaimed: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but I do what I hate. And if I do what I do not want to do ... it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me" (Romans 7:15-17).

Paul's describing a kind of *suffering*. Part of its explanation is that we humans are not only conscious beings like all the other animals, but we are also *self-conscious*. We can become aware of what we're aware of. Being self-conscious is a big part of what makes us so amazing. It's one of our superpowers. But, this superpower makes it possible for us to be divided in our personal self.

If I'm honest, I have to admit that auto-pilot-me is steering my life much more frequently than meta-conscious=me. This would be okay if auto-pilot-me could be trusted to do the right thing. But, it's usually auto-pilot-me who gets me into trouble. It's usually auto-pilot-me who acts in insensitive ways to those around me. It's auto-pilot-me who blurts out something before considering how it will hurt someone.

Our auto-pilot behavior is driven by our habits, our impulses, our dispositions, our emotions. When these habits and impulses are good ones, they tend to produce virtuous behavior. All of us have some good habits, dispositions, and impulses. When our behavior flows from them, our meta-conscious selves are usually pleased, because most of us want to be the kinds of persons who do good.

But, when we sin, and are thereby separated from ourselves or from others or from God, our meta-conscious selves are wretched and ashamed. We long to become the kinds of person who do not so easily become separated from ourselves, others, and God. We want integration within ourselves.

But, mere self-integration is not the goal for Christians, for what if you want to be the kind of person who does bad things? For instance, what if your meta-conscious-self desires what Donald Trump desires: to dominate others and to get your own way, regardless of the evil it causes? Self-integration with this kind of meta-conscious-self would not be a good thing.

Christians, by which I mean followers of Christ, want their self-integration to be Christ-focused. Our lectionary readings for today indicate that we are to be led by the good shepherd, who is Jesus. But, what does this mean, and how might we here today be led by Jesus?

By identifying himself as the good shepherd, Jesus surely had in mind Psalm 23, which is of course a psalm of assurance. And in John's gospel, we are told that Jesus's shepherding care for us is so great that he would be willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of our ultimate peace, security, and good.

But, here's the thing: our ultimate peace, security, and good depends on our *hearing* the good shepherd's voice and *following* him. What does this metaphor mean? It is without doubt a metaphor. Jesus is not literally a shepherd, and we are not literally sheep. The metaphor pertains to our relation to the divine. Our ultimate peace, security, and good, which are known in the Christian tradition as "salvation", requires that we know what the divine's will is for us, that we ourselves desire that very will, and that we have developed the habits, dispositions, and impulses that impel us to do the divine will. In short, it requires that your meta-conscious-self knows and desires God's will for you, and it requires integration with your auto-pilot-self.

Thus, becoming a person who can both *hear* the good shepherd's voice and also *follow* it requires us to be transformed, and transformation requires change. In last week's homily, Father Kaisch was quite right to stress that biblical sin is not about condemnation for screwing things up, but is rather about separation. We all miss the mark. We are not condemned for missing the mark, but our separation from it is real. If we do nothing about our sin, we remain separated from ourselves, from others, and from God. This is why Jesus, who did not condemn the woman caught in adultery, advised her to sin no more (John 8:11). For to remain in sin is to remain separated from our true good.

How do we become integrated selves who are fit to follow the good shepherd? I would not dare to say that there is any one way this must happen. Clearly God works in a great variety of ways. Anyone who tells you that there is one path for everyone is naïve or deluded. And my own experience is that God works in me in varying ways, sometimes through prayer, sometimes through worship, sometimes through interactions with other people, sometimes in meditation and other forms of contemplation. But, it seems to me that to get into a place of ongoing spiritual flow requires several cooperating causes: one is that we need to know who the good shepherd is so that we will know what his voice sounds like. The scriptures tell us that many people will follow false Christs (Matthew 24). We see this clearly in our world today where so many self-professed Christians are hearing the voice of a white nationalist Jesus. If you follow that voice, and if you seek to integrate yourself in his image, you may get what you wanted, but it will not be Christ.

So, reading, studying, and knowing the life and teachings of Jesus is very important, and we must learn to interpret the scriptures in light of Jesus' call for inclusiveness, justice, and self-giving love. It really is important that we get our theology and Christology right (or at least close enough).

But, knowing who Jesus is and knowing what kind of voice to listen for is not enough. Many of us self-professed Christians have the right

meta-conscious views but our auto-pilot selves have not been transformed and so, even when we know what we should do, we're unable to do it. We are often like Paul who did what his meta-conscious-self didn't want to do.

Getting our auto-pilot selves moving in the right direction is the hardest work for most of us. For this requires changes in our habits, dispositions, and desires. But our habits and dispositions are resistant to change. Here the spiritual disciplines are often crucial. In my own experience, it is the passive, or quiet, disciplines that produce the most fruit. Contemplative prayer, such as the centering prayer practiced here at St. Barnabas', has been wonderful in helping me to quiet my mind and lessen my anxiety. The practices of solitude, silence, fasting, and contemplative prayer take me out of my everyday habits and show me that there is another mode of consciousness available to me. And, over time, and I do want to stress that the spiritual disciplines take a lot of practice; over time this new consciousness seeps into my everyday life and I find my auto-pilot desires shifting to align better with my meta-conscious desires to follow the voice of the good shepherd.

There is a reason that the spiritual disciplines have been lauded for ages as tools for transformation toward the good. It is worth noting how often Jesus goes out to a lonely place for solitude, prayer, or fasting. If Jesus needed to do these things, and we are followers of Jesus, then we should expect that we will need to do those things so that we can discern God's will and be empowered by the Holy Spirit to do what each of us is uniquely suited and called to do.

So, today, I encourage you to think about how your own auto-pilot-self is misaligned with the person you want to be, and I encourage you to do something about it.