

Homily – The Best Version of Yourself

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June 21, 2026 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church

Those of you that use Facebook know that some people post infrequently and some people post many times a day. I tend to be one of those people that posts less frequently, and if you looked at my posts you would think that my life was full of musical performances, church stuff, and family. Not an inaccurate depiction of my life, but it is certainly not complete. Facebook is part of my public personae, but it is not an accurate reflection of who I really am. Facebook can lead us to the age old trap in which we think a person's public image is the same as their internal being.

Paul writes about this same trap in his letter to the Romans. Last week I shared that we will be reading from the Gospel of Matthew for the next twenty-four weeks. In this long season after Pentecost we will also be reading from Paul's letter to the Romans for fourteen Sunday mornings. In all of his letters that we have in our New Testament, Paul is guiding the early followers of Jesus. He is guiding them on how they can be in spiritual community together. And, he is also directing them on how individuals can improve their own spirituality. Specifically, Paul writes about the trap that we have on Facebook in which we think that the external personae of good deeds and obeying the Laws is all there is. Paul reminds us that the interior life of a person is foundational for everything else and that you can only ignore the interior life for so long.

Two thousand years ago, Paul's practical advice was to focus all of the different parts of your being on Christ. In this way one can stop doing the things one doesn't want to do. In this way you can nurture your interior and feed your soul. God has created each and every one of us to be beautiful, but we often fall short. Don't you want to be the best version of yourself? Don't you want your loved ones to be at their best as well? Today, I am going to share some practical advice from the Apostle Paul, and by extension Jesus, on how to move beyond the exterior self to the inner self.

One framework that I have found useful in my spiritual journey is to think of the self as three components – the body, the mind and the spirit. The body is this thing you see standing here before you, and it is also this thing that will turn back to dust after I die. The mind is the combination of my thoughts and feelings. The brain may provide a physical basis for my thoughts and feelings, but I still look at the gathering and processing of data as a separate component of my being. My thoughts and feelings may be rational or irrational, they may be right or wrong, but they are all still parts of myself. And then there is the spirit. For me, the spirit is the beautiful part of self that connects to God and to others. The spirit is more than thoughts and feelings. It is

something both deeper and more nebulous. The spirit is the part of self that continues on after death. Our spirit is about connections and about relationships.

In his book, “The Renovation of the Heart” philosopher and theologian, Dallas Willard, breaks the components of self into six parts instead of three.

Thoughts,
Feelings,
the Will,
the Body,
the Social dimension of self,
and the soul.

There are other frameworks out there by psychologists as well. The common thing across these frameworks is to conceptualize the self as various integrated components.

And, each of the components must be fed and nurtured. Focusing in on the model of three parts of self, we must feed and nurture our bodies. We must feed and nurture our minds. And, we must feed and nurture our spirits.

And when they aren't fed and nurtured they wither. We are most familiar with the effects of poor care on our bodies, but our minds and spirits need care as well.

Now, the health of one component affects the health and wellbeing of the other two. For example, poor body health will drag down the mind and spirit. Conversely, improvements in a component can lift up the others.

I think this is how spiritual healing works. As our spirits are lifted high there can be a corresponding impact on body and mind.

All of these parts of self are interrelated, and the trick is to aim each and every component of self, whether we think of it in three parts or six, each part of self must be aimed at God. In this way you can be more alive than you have ever been.

So now let us look at how we can do this.

We spend much of our lives being ruled by our bodies. “For good or for evil, the body lies right at the center of a spiritual life... One can immediately see all around us that the human body is a primary barrier to aiming all of life at God. The body is not inherently evil, but still it is a fact that the body often hinders people in doing what

they know to be good and right. God made our bodies for good. The body should be cherished and properly cared for, not as our master, but as a servant of God.

Trouble comes when we place our bodies at the center of the universe instead of God. We worship the body and the life of sensuality that results. The body becomes our primary source of gratification and the chief, if not the only, instrument for getting what we want in life. Furthermore, a person caught up in rage or lust or resentment or even religious self-righteousness is basically one whose body has taken over, and, at least for the moment, the body is totally running his or her actions or even life.”

The proper retraining and nurturing of the body is absolutely essential to aiming all of self at God. As the Apostle Paul says to the Romans, all of our bodies, every tissue and muscle, must be inclined towards God. To this end we must (1) release our body to God, (2) no longer idolize the body, (3) stop misuse of the body, and (4) properly honor and care for the body. In addition, many of us hold trauma in our bodies, those negative experiences that can be triggered again and again. Part of our life long journey is to let go of trauma. This is not easy and for someone with PTSD it seems almost impossible, but all things are possible with God. None of this body stuff is easy, but it is still essential if you are going to live into the best version of yourself.

In addition to the body, the mind must also be aimed at God. “Thoughts and feelings are the place where we can and must begin to change... The ultimate freedom we have as human beings is the power to select what we will allow our minds and hearts to dwell on. This includes our memories, ideas, perceptions, feelings and beliefs. And, here is what we must do.

The Gospel of Jesus directly repudiates all false information about God and by extension, about the meaning of human life. There are so many things of the world that have nothing to do with God. Even our churches can lead us astray, but we must always turn back to those things that are truly of Jesus. But for us to recognize Jesus we must use our ability to think. We must search out what must be true, or cannot be true, in the light of given facts or assumptions. Thinking is a powerful gift from God to be used in the service of truth.

To bring the mind to dwell intelligently upon God will have the effect of causing us to love God passionately, and this love will in turn bring us to think of God steadily.

As we do this we must avoid four traps. First, we must avoid pride and overconfidence in ideas, images and bits of information about God simply because they are ours. Arrogance of doctrine or tradition is still arrogance. In humility we must recognize that we may be wrong.

Second, we must continue to learn as much as we can about God and overcome ignorance. We must live in a state of openness and learning.

Third, we must not allow our desires to guide our thinking; especially the desire to prove we are right. We must try to remain aware of how our desires may influence how we perceive things, as well as our patterns of thought and interpretation.”

And fourth, to aim our minds at God, we must guard from the barrage of images and data that are being thrown at us. Silence, emptiness and rest are antidotes to noise, and will allow God in. To that end try one of the many forms of meditation. We have Centering Prayer here at St. Barnabas every Friday afternoon.

Be that as it may, we must each take action to aim our bodies at God, aim our minds and God, and finally aim our spirits at God.

I’ve said this many times before. Our spirit is all about our connections and relationships. It is healthy loving relationships with God, others, self, and the rest of non-human creation. Christ is in and around all and the Christ in you is connected to the Christ in me by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit enlivens us, and it is the life-center of the human being. It regulates whatever is occurring in each of the four dimensions of love. We were created by God to be in relationships, and our life long spiritual journey is to make our relationships as healthy as possible.

For such a person, the human spirit will be in correct relationships to God. With God’s assisting grace, it will bring our human spirit into subjection to God and the mind into subjection to the spirit. Our human relationships and our bodies will then come into subjection to thoughts and feelings that are in agreement with truth and with God’s intent and purposes for us. Any given event in our life would then proceed as it should, because our spiritual life is functioning properly under God.

The wisdom of the Apostle Paul, and by extension Jesus, is a wisdom that will allow us to aim our interior self and lives at God. It is a wisdom that advises an integrated approach to aiming each part of our selves. And, as we devote all of our self to God, we live into the best version of ourselves. We live into the way that God created us.

Today, I ask God’s blessing on your body, your mind, and your spirit so that all may lean in towards and be devoted to God.