

From the Pastor's Desk

The Illusion of the Separate Self

You and I are the result of the union of our parents. We were nurtured for nine months in our mother's womb, nearly crushed to death while forced through the birth canal and thrust out into the world a bloody mess, crying and no doubt thinking: "What's happening to me? I want to return home to the warmth and nurture of mommy's womb!" And the separation continued: I cried on the first day of school, again pulled away from those I loved and forced to spend much of my life in an institution called elementary school. Years later, I drove away from my hometown to the university, again with tears in my eyes as the miles separated me from home. And the separation continued from family, high school and college friends, seminary friends, friends in ministry and friends in previous congregations and cities.

"Boys don't cry! You have to be tough! Be a man!" So began the scars upon our souls as we were forced to create a separate self. We learned to develop calluses around our hearts, which is why getting in touch with their feelings is not easy for many men and some women too. Our task now is undoing some of the trauma that turned us into separate individuals, perhaps necessary to mature, but it's not where we want to spend the rest of our lives. Intimacy demands other skills.

Our secular society tends to idolize the separate self and promotes a harsh materialistic world where money is supreme and one has to squint to see a more meaningful existence. Even religion can reinforce a sense of separation, which was written into the script and called "original sin", where God was perceived as angry and booting humanity out of the Garden of Eden, the ultimate separation. But, what was really kicked out of the Garden was our "separate self". Salvation or enlightenment is realizing we really never left the Garden. It's all around us.

Our secular society has diminished the sacredness of creation by turning our world into a commodity to be exploited and human beings into "consumers". In this process we have been estranged from creation and taught to find salvation in another world. Our task is to overcome this estrangement and see that we are one with all of life, indeed, the whole universe. Salvation is opening our eyes and finding that the Garden of Eden is in our midst. Salvation, especially as proclaimed by John's Gospel is here and now.

Unity with all of creation is hard to comprehend in the United States where hyper-individualism has diminished our sense of shared community. Government gridlock is inevitable when people are elected because they ran against the government. The problem is primarily the loss of a sense of shared community, which is creating much of the despair experienced these days. Hyper-individualism and the separate self are also alien to the Gospel. One definition of sin is separation.

Looking at the resurrected life through the lens of cosmology may help us find our way back to God and one another. Pastor and author Bruce Sanguin states that living a life of resurrection involves trusting in the process that new life comes from death throughout the cosmos. For example, when a star explodes into supernova, its particles become the building blocks for future stars. The birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ is the archetype of this cosmic process.

“Cosmo genesis” is a term scientists use to indicate that the universe is recreating itself through life—death—life every moment throughout the cosmos. It is a pattern for all of us. When we die new life will emerge, which is not only a religious belief, but a cosmic reality.

Pastor Sanguin points out four qualities of living a resurrected life: Living with immensity, intensity, intimacy and intentionality.

Living with Immensity—We realize how huge the cosmos is! 100 billion galaxies each with billions of stars. Galaxies are full of life and we are a part of this life. As we develop the capacity of cosmic awe, wonder and reverence, it leads to the praise of God, life and creation.

Living with Intensity—We appreciate the incredible gift that life is. Our point of reference begins to shift from our self to our shared life on this planet. Sanguin states that we begin to see that we are the presence of the universe in human form. Perhaps for the first time in its history, through human consciousness, the universe is becoming aware of itself.

Living with Intimacy—Just as we have intimacy with our loved ones, we can develop a sense of intimacy with all of creation. Fall in love with creation, and like the unity love creates with another person, it can create an awareness and kinship with all of creation. We may feel alone in the universe, which is a painful experience, but it is false. The bacteria in our stomachs are direct descendants of bacteria from billions of years ago. Our kinship is cosmic and spans millennia.

Living with Intentionality—We are not only part of the evolving cosmos, through our free will and choices, we determine our future path. As we die to self in Christ, we are raised up. Listen to the quiet voice of God’s Spirit and make choices directed toward love.

Developing intimacy with all of creation is a cure for the loneliness and estrangement of the separate self. When Saint Francis of Assisi became aware of this, he wrote “The Canticle of the Sun” which was adapted into a song by Marty Haugen:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God,
And all creation is shouting for joy!
Come, dance in the forest, come, play in the field,
And sing, sing to the glory of the Lord!*

Praise for the sun, the bringer of day, he carries the light of the Lord in his rays; the moon and the stars who light up the way unto your throne! (refrain)

Praise for the wind that blows through the trees, the seas' mighty storms, the gentlest breeze; they blow where they will, they blow where they please to please the Lord! (refrain)

Praise for the rain that waters our fields, and blesses our crops so all the earth yields; from death unto life her mystery revealed springs forth in joy! (refrain)

Praise for the fire who gives us his light, the warmth of the sun to brighten our night; he dances with joy, his spirit so bright, he sings of you! (refrain)

~ PB