

Spirituality as Knowing Myself

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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If we were to ask people what the goal of spirituality is, many might say ‘to know God.’ Or, at least, ‘to be in touch with the transcendent.’ This is true. Spirituality does involve finding God and lifting our spirits up to a higher power. But is that it?

The Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote, “there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace, and my happiness depend: *to discover myself* in discovering God.” For Merton, there is a whole other dimension to spirituality than just discovering God. It is discovering myself. Who am I?

True Christian spirituality is about coming to know both God and myself. The two are not opposed. Just focusing on knowing God seems holy and pious, but it is a cheap form of spirituality. It is not transformative. Unfortunately, much of Christian spirituality has been in this direction. We have been taught that God is everything and we are nothing, as if there was nothing inherently worthwhile about us, as we if could just ignore and pass over ourselves. But in reality, at least according to God, there is something worthwhile about us.

In the opening lines of today’s First Reading from the prophet *Jeremiah*, God says, “before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.” God thought there was something worthwhile to get to know in us, even from before our birth. If God thinks there is something there, so should we.

Trying to know ourselves is not selfish. It is actually quite a humbling experience, for we realize that underneath all the accumulated filth of our lives, there is something holy and sacred at our core. Finding that center is a lifelong journey, one that many people, including Christians, never take. We would rather just focus on God, but even God points us back to ourselves.

Self-knowledge is a difficult journey. St. Paul, in his letter to the *Corinthians* in our second reading acknowledges this. He says, “for we know partially and we prophesy partially...at present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror.” In other words, our

vision is blurred by shadows and illusions in this life. St. Paul longs for the day when everything is made clear. On that day, he says, "I shall know fully, as I am fully known." We, too, look forward to that day, when we know fully and are fully known, when our knowledge of ourselves and our knowledge of God are one and the same.

Spirituality is about knowing God, but also about coming to know ourselves.

Do I realize that the search for God and the search for myself is one and the same journey?

A spirituality of just coming to know God is ultimately boring and uninteresting. There is no relationship or interaction there. Our spirits come alive when we take knowledge of ourselves just as seriously as we take knowledge of God. "Our existence, our peace, and our happiness depend on this: to discover myself in discovering God" and to finish Merton's quote, "if I find God I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find God."