

A sermon preached on December 9th, 2018 – the second Sunday in Advent -- based upon Luke 3:1-6

I'd like to begin this morning by inviting you to think back to your experience of being in middle school, or to think of the experience of a middle schooler you know and love. I see some of you grimacing.

The experience can be pretty tough and a large part of what makes it so hard is the pressure felt to "fit in." There can be a quality of desperation and fear to this need. It is as if there are this set of unwritten rules that the cool kids came up with to which everybody else feels compelled to conform. Self-expression is inhibited under a paralyzing self-consciousness and profound feelings of inadequacy. "If I can't 'fit in' at least don't let me 'stand out!' Better to be invisible than be the object of mockery." And so the young person feels obliged as Jesus put it, "to hide one's light under a bushel."

Although Middle School is often the most intense time in a person's life regarding these kinds of pressures, on some level the struggle persists throughout the course of life.

There are these two great needs we human beings have which in this broken world often come in conflict.

The first is to connect with other human beings. It is the need to belong. God said, "It is not good for Adam to be alone," expressing this innate need for connection, whether simply to one other person, a mate – or to a tribe. We are social beings who require relationships to feel whole.

The second need is a little more difficult to express, but I will call it is the need to be authentic.

There is this story from a famous Rabbi of the 19th century named Zusha that gets at this need. Zusha was lying on his death bed with uncontrollable tears. His students tried to comfort him by telling him that he was almost as wise as Moses and as kind as Abraham, so he was sure to be judged positively in Heaven. But he replied, "When I get to Heaven, I will not be asked, 'Why weren't you more like Moses?' or 'Why weren't you more like Abraham?' God will ask me, "Why weren't you like Zusha?"

Being the unique person God designed us as opposed to some attempt to be who others think we are supposed to be is what it means to live authentically. When it comes to human souls, God doesn't produce them in an assembly line fashion. Each is an individual work of art. Authentic living recognizes we all experience life differently -- we each have a unique perspective – and embraces that fact. Authenticity requires some degree of consistency between the self we project to the world and the self we experience inside.

Socrates was getting at the idea of our need to live authentically when he declared, “To thy own self be true.”

Now, there is a potential danger to making Socrates’ maxim, “to thy own self be true” the central principle of our lives. It could be interpreted in a way that gives us permission to be self-centered, inconsiderate, indeed cruel and to this concern I will return later.

So there are these two basic needs and oftentimes in life it can feel as though we are given a choice. If we want to be connected and belong we have to conform and forsake living authentically. We have to fit in. If we want to live authentically, we have to risk rejection and abandonment.

In our Gospel lesson Luke begins by naming the people who were at the top of the food chain during the time Jesus began his ministry. To use our middle school analogy, these were the “cool kids”. These were the people who held the power in the political and religious institutions of the day and set the rules by which others were compelled to conform.

But, Luke tells us, it wasn’t to the cool kids that the Word of the Lord came. It wasn’t in their lives that the Spirit of God began to move in transformative, life-giving way.

No, the Word of the Lord came to this distinctly oddball character we know as John the Baptist who lived out in the wilderness eating locusts and wild honey. In terms of the choice between “fitting in” and “living authentically” long ago John quit trying to “fit in” and was all about living authentically – living the life God had created him to live.

Throughout the ages the wilderness has been a place people have gone in order to intentionally step out of the societal structures that have such a hold over us. In the wilderness we can leave for a time all the ways in which the world defines us allowing us see things more clearly than when we were caught up in the “rat race.” The silence of the wilderness is a good place to listen for the voice of God beyond the clamber of all the other voices vying for our attention.

Out in the wilderness John saw more clearly the truth of just how broken this world is. He saw the injustice – the way this world oppresses people.

Having seen this, God gave John a message to deliver. Luke tells us that John proclaimed “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness for the forgiveness of sins.” Most people hearing this today miss the ramifications of what this meant.

First, people generally misconstrue what it means to “repent”? It’s not feeling bad about one’s self, though the church has often promoted this notion. To repent is to “change” the direction we are moving, or the way we are thinking. It implies we have been walking away from God and we need to turn and walk with God. It means we’ve been thinking the way the world thinks, and we need to start thinking the way God thinks.

It is important to notice that John's call to repentance isn't directed towards just some people – you know, the “bad apples” – no, the assumption is that everybody needs to repent – change the way we look at life. In a sense John is saying we're all messed up. The world has messed up our thinking. Every one of us has strayed from God – from the right path. The cool kids and the not-cool kids alike.

Sometimes the first step towards authenticity is being able to acknowledge our brokenness. The perfectionism that leads us to flee from this kind of honest owning of our flaws and weakness is spirit-killing. The Leonard Cohen verse comes to mind: “Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.”

Luke tells us that the repentance John is calling for is for the sake of the “forgiveness of sins.” Not understanding the context, we miss how radical, how subversive John's message was -- that God stands ready to forgive – right here, right now. You don't have to jump through the hoops of the cool kids in order to be loved by God.

In delivering the good news that forgiveness is available right here, right now John was declaring that the prevailing religious system of the day – the one the cool kids ran – was a lie. In this case the rules to what it means to be “cool” weren't unwritten, they were written down in Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy and there were 624 of them. Especially if you were poor and struggling simply to survive it was pretty much impossible to keep all these rules. So people lived their lives weighed down by a load of guilt which could only be forgiven by travelling to Jerusalem, purchasing unblemished animals to hand over to the Temple priests to sacrifice to atone for their sin.

So John was a prophet in a long line of prophets that includes Martin Luther King, Jr. It's dangerous to be a prophet. When a person speaks out regarding the change that needs to happen not only in individuals but also in society at large regarding the unjust laws that oppress people the way King did there is inevitably a price to be paid. As King was murdered in Memphis, so John ended up being killed by King Herod, one of the cool kids Luke mentions.

And yet when people find the courage to let their God-given light shine – though there will likely be a push back, there will also be people who are drawn to that light. Consequently, a great many people came out into the wilderness to hear what John had to say.

Earlier I indicated that there could be a danger of making Socrates' “To thy own self be true” the central theme to one's life – that it could be interpreted as giving permission to be a jerk, to live a self-centered, inconsiderate, indeed cruel life.

But after the cool kids' laws are thrown out there is one law that remains. When Jesus was asked which law was the greatest, he gave two which represent two sides of the same coin:

Love God and love your neighbor. The one law is love. The authentic self God has given each of us is a unique vessel through which God's love flows. If love is a kind of music, then each of us is a completely different instrument, or playing a completely different part in God's great symphony. You don't have to play somebody else's instrument in the symphony, but you do have something unique to contribute to the symphony of love.

Finally, when it comes to love often the most difficult aspect is loving oneself. Authentic living involves loving the self God has created us to be.

I was talking to a therapist who works with young people and he described working with a teenager on the autism spectrum. He said the youth recognized that he was different from other teenagers, and in his judgment different meant bad, unlovable. The great challenge in their therapy together was to get the young man to see that being different wasn't a bad thing: to get him to love himself.

We in the church recognize that the fact God loves us gives us a point of entry in terms of learning to love ourselves.

And how can we love our neighbor as ourselves if we can't love ourselves?

That's the great barrier to authentic living: The inability to love oneself.

Jesus came along after John with a similar message regarding repentance and the forgiveness of sins, but he added to it the good news that the Kingdom of God was at hand. The Kingdom of God is the place where you don't have to choose between belonging and being authentic. Each can be who God made us to be and we can still belonging deeply. That is what our mission statement talks about: our belief in contrast to the thinking of this world that we can love people without needing them to reflect back our own image. We can love them even as they look differently from ourselves, or see the world differently. Being carbon copies of one another is not a requirement for love. Each human being in all their uniqueness bears the image of God and is worthy of our love.

That's what we're on earth to bear witness to.

Extra add on:

He following is an interesting article I came across about one of the first photographers, a woman in a field dominated by men, who was mocked because she did not see the necessity of perfection in the art of photography:

Just six months after she was given her very first camera, Julia Margaret Cameron applied to join the Photographic Society of London (now the Royal Photographic Society). For a 48-year-old woman in the Victorian era, a time when photography was both brand-new and completely dominated by men, this showed serious chutzpah.

Overcoming the less than warm welcome she received required more confidence still. From the start, Cameron's work was lambasted in the press. And the biggest cause of criticism was the thing that, ironically, would turn out to be the hallmark of her style and her enduring fame: her mistakes.

“Her photographic contemporaries criticized her work for being out of focus – which she says she did deliberately – for being ‘slovenly’, as they put it. For leaving flaws, like splotches and swirls you get from the uneven application of chemicals, or smearing things when the plate was still wet. Those kinds of flaws are things that the other photographers would have discarded as mistakes. She seemed to either accept, at the very least, or embrace them.”

The art of accident

At the time, many saw photography as a science rather than an art. Cameron's peers had correspondingly mechanical tendencies: their goal was the accurate, precise rendering of a subject – none of this artsy, emotional expression.

But Cameron, who used the extremely messy and difficult-to-master [wet collodion process](#) – which involves coating glass with an even layer of collodion, sensitizing it with a bath of silver nitrate, and exposing and developing the plate while it's still wet – wasn't nearly as fussed about precision.

As *The Photographic News* snorted, “What in the name of all the nitrate of silver that ever turned white into black have these pictures in common with good photography? Smudged, torn, dirty, undefined, and in some cases almost unreadable, there is hardly one of them that ought not to have been washed off the plate as soon as its image had appeared.”

One of the major ‘flaws’ of Cameron's work was her blurred focus. It's not clear if this came about deliberately or not. After all, her first lens and camera had a short focal length and a

fixed aperture that made it impossible to get everything in sharp focus. Making it more difficult was the fact that, because exposures at the time could be some 10 minutes long, any movement on the part of her models – who weren't professional and were unused to such work – would result in blurred pictures. Cameron herself said that her first successes in taking photographs with the kind of focus she wanted, like Annie, were “a fluke”.

But not wishing to create the impression that this was all a happy accident, Cameron added immediately: “That is to say when focusing and coming to something which to my eye was very beautiful I stopped there, instead of screwing on the Lens to a more definite focus which all other Photographers prefer.” A mistake became an act of rebellion against the status quo.

It also became an element that made Cameron's photographs not only different – but helped raise photography to an art form. At the International Exhibition of 1862, there even were debates over whether photographs should be shown with the machines, or with the painting and sculpture. (In the end, unable to decide, the organizers gave photography its own section).

Cameron had no doubts where her pictures, at least, belonged. “My aspirations are to ennoble Photography and to secure for it the character and uses of High Art, by combining the real & ideal & sacrificing nothing of Truth by all possible devotion to poetry and beauty,” she wrote to the astronomer Sir John Herschel, her friend and mentor, in 1864.

Poetry, beauty, a mix of the real and ideal: what could achieve those aims better than a soft focus, dramatic lighting and the subjects' emotive expressions? Today, looking at her portraits feels almost like communing with spirits. Take the Mountain Nymph, shot in July 1866: with the direct gaze, high contrast and hazy atmosphere, the portrait looks dreamy and ethereal, like a phantom appearing out of the past.

Given Cameron's devotion to photography as an art, it's unsurprising that she was inspired by other artists, too, particularly Renaissance and Baroque painters. Or that, even while most photography critics eviscerated her, those in the art world celebrated her work and her aims. Many of her photographs incorporate familiar Renaissance elements like heavy drapery, triangular compositions and diagonal lighting. Her treatment of Sir John Herschel – an important man made real and intimate to the viewer with his weary, intense expression and unkempt hair – seems reminiscent of portraits like Raphael's [Pope Julius II](#).

“If someone else were approaching it, it would probably be a formal portrait, quite stiff,” says Tim Clark, curator of the exhibition at London’s Science Museum. “Not here. She pushes the camera really up close and personal to dwell on his features.” Before photographing Herschel, Cameron even ordered him to go wash and tousle his hair, giving a halo of intelligence.

But it was the pre-Raphaelites who especially embraced Cameron. One of the things she shared with them was a propensity to stage tableaux: many of her photographs were of religious or literary scenes, drawn from the tales of King Arthur or Greek legends. She used props and costumes, and she was notorious for luring potential models to her studio; she even hired maids based not on their housekeeping skills, but on how they would look in her pictures. While this kind of staging now seems sentimental and Victorian, it would also, of course, become thoroughly postmodern. In some ways, you can draw a line from Cameron right up to Cindy Sherman.

No matter how staged the composition itself, there’s almost always a Cameron ‘flaw’. Or was it a flaw at all? In *La Madonna Vigilante*, she has scratched the emulsion off the plate on the upper right of the picture. Perhaps there was something in the photograph she didn’t like. Or perhaps she did it for effect: to emphasize the halo around the Madonna’s head.

These ‘mistakes’ also allow the viewer into the studio with her. In a series she made of two children, entitled *Paul and Virginia*, each image gives us a different glimpse behind the scenes. One shows the disembodied hand of a helper holding a dark cloth. In another, the hand is gone, but Cameron evidently didn’t like the size of little Paul’s feet; she has scratched into them to make them smaller.

This frank, open approach put Cameron far ahead of her time. “It’s not too much of a stretch of the imagination to imagine her in a postmodern vein, where she’s revealing the artist’s hand and the process of picture-making,” Clark says.

Still, would Cameron have preferred a more seamless execution? Are these tell-tale signs really, in fact, ‘mistakes’? It’s hard to know. What we do know is that there were plenty of photographs that she discarded – some of which are on display at the V&A. The rest were those that she wanted to be shown. That made her, as one of the kinder critics of her time wrote in 1866, “the first person who had the wit to see her mistakes were her successes.”

And that, in many ways, may be the true mark of genius – artistic or scientific. As Weiss says, “That’s how people make discoveries. You stumble upon something, and then it becomes deliberate.”