

Homily for the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Most people would agree that there has been a big shift in American culture in recent years.

A big shift from a culture of self-effacement,
of putting others ahead of you,
of thinking of others as above you,
...to the culture of BIG ME.

It's not hard to find hard data to back this up.

In the 1950's, psychologists asked more than 10,00 adolescents if they considered themselves a very important individual. 12% said yes.

In 1989, the same question was asked and 80% of boys said they considered themselves highly important; 77% of girls considered themselves the same.

Psychologists have a thing called the Narcissism Test. They read people statements and ask if the statements apply to them.

Statements such as:

I like to be the center of attention.

Somebody should write a biography about me.

I show off every time I get the chance.

The medium narcissism score has risen 30% in the last two decades.

Today, 93% of young people score higher than the medium score. The highest number agreeing with the statements:

I am an extraordinary person.

and

I like to look at my own body.

This should come as no surprise.

For generations, commencements speakers have been telling graduates to:

You are special.

Trust yourself.
Follow your passion.
Question authority, but believe your *own* truth...
even if it's something previous generations
easily and readily recognized as
nothing more than:

Rationalization and Self-Justification.

Yes, we are living the Age of **The Big Me**.

But, don't despair.
The modern age has not cornered the market on narcissism.
It's been around a long time
and the biblical book of Jonah is a solid proof
that narcissism is nothing new.

The book opens with God giving a clear and direct order to Jonah, the prophet:
"Jonah, go and preach against the great city, Nineveh,
because its wickedness has come before me."

Jonah doesn't say a word.
He just high-tails it out of town,
gets on a boat going in the opposite direction!

He doesn't like the Ninevites,
they're wicked and mean and brutal and violent
and he has no intention of paying them a visit.

He buys a ticket for Tarshish instead, a town far away and across the sea.

ACT TWO

Jonah arrives on the beach of Nineveh
by way of the belly of a whale.

The Word of God comes to Jonah a second time:
“Go through the streets of Nineveh.
Tell the people they must reform their lives.”

Jonah shows little enthusiasm for this job assignment.
In all the pages of the Bible,
there has never been a more self-centered prophet!

But no sooner than he starts his reluctant revival,
the entire place converts!

That’s right!
After but one day of preaching,
the enormous city repents:
the king, every bureaucrat,
every man, every woman...
every dog, every cat, every donkey!

Everybody repents and starts praising God!
Everybody, that is, except Jonah.

The end of the story finds Jonah in a big pout
out on some barren hill
on the outskirts of town.

When God asks him what he’s doing,
he complains and says,
“They don’t deserve to be forgiven,
and I’m not happy one bit about it!
You let them off the hook
and, frankly, this entire ordeal turns my stomach.
Go away. Let me die!”

That’s how the book ends.
We never learn if Jonah sheds his narcissistic nature or not.

Nevertheless, there’s a lot to glean from this story.

This old story with a **Big Fish**
has a lot to say about what happens when you live inside **The Big Me**.

Here are three, quick and easy conclusions:

1. Jonah's self-centeredness leads to pride.
His focus on himself leads him to see himself
as superior to everyone else.
2. His self-centeredness inflates his sense of self-worth.
This, in turn, makes him painfully sensitive to any perceived snub or insult.
3. The end result is loneliness and isolation.
He can't stand to be in anyone's presence.
No one is good enough;
No one rises to his expectations...
So he heads out of town to avoid associating with other people.
Which, in a backward kind of way, is considerate
and most people prefer to avoid him.

...

How different is the reaction of the fishermen in today's gospel.

Instead of running away from the Lord's clear and direct summons,
they drop their nets,
abandon their agendas
let go their attachments
turn their backs on their long-term plans
and they follow Christ.

Heck, you might say they *run* after him
...so eager are they to prove themselves worthy
of the ***unexpected attention***
they received at on the fishing docks,
attention they surely felt they did not deserve.

In another account of Jesus calling St. Peter to follow him,
Peter's response was nothing like the response of a narcissist who says of himself,
"I am an extraordinary person."

Rather, when Peter realizes that Jesus is the Messiah,
at once, he drops to his knees and says,
"Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

That's not something you hear every day.
Actually, it's something you hardly ever hear at all:

In a world that consistently sends the message:

You are special.

You are talented.

You are extraordinary.

You seldom come across a person
with the humility to admit to mistakes,
much less confront the human tendency to commit sin,
and fess up to the sadness that it yields.

According to some social commentators,
it's not that we don't have a sense of what is right or wrong,
but we have lost the ability to talk about it,
we have lost the ability be *morally articulate*.

We can talk about what nicotine does to the lungs,
but we have no words to describe—in any convincing way—
what casual sex does to the soul
or its effects on society as a whole.

We have no words to describe—in any convincing way—
why we should stop throwing away billions of dollars of food
when millions of children in our own country—16 million—
struggle with hunger.

We have no longer a moral vocabulary to help us identify—in any convincing way—
how a society that no longer upholds integrity and virtue
yields a civilization of corruption and despair.

This is not to say that human beings, prone to sin and moral blindness,
are no better than dirt.

Not at all!

Our religion holds that we are made in the image of the Creator
and the Book of Psalms reminds us that each one of us

is “fearfully and wonderfully made.”

Yet, we are flawed.

We do sin.

Still, we have the capacity to recognize it.

which means we have the capacity

to struggle against it

...and rise above it.

We need to remember Peter’s honest self-assessment
the day he dropped to his knees at the feet of Christ and said,
“Leave me, Lord, I am a sinful man.”

We need to remember those **humble words** of St. Peter.
But we must never forget the **strong challenge** issued by Christ:

“Stand up,” said the Lord.

“Stand up.

And come.

Come follow me.”

