

Letting Go of the Bananas

In case you're ever in India and want to do some hunting, here is a sure way to catch a monkey:

Take a half of a large coconut, hollow it out and make a hole through the side of it – just large enough to let a monkey's hand pass through. Then: fasten the coconut shell firmly to the ground over a hole filled with tempting monkey food – bananas would be a good choice.

Without fail, a monkey will approach the coconut, intent on getting hold of the food beneath it. As soon as the monkey grabs the food in its fist, it is unable to pull its hand and the food back through the hole in the coconut. Imprisoned, the monkey will stay there for hours refusing to open its fist and let go of the food, and thus, the monkey becomes easy prey for the monkey hunter....

We might say that the monkey's obsession with the bananas under the coconut ...enslaves, ...imprisons, ...paralyzes the monkey.

A question I would like to pose for each of us as Americans, as Catholics, as human beings living in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is: Are there things in my life that I'm obsessed with? Preoccupied with? Things that, when all is said and done, enslave me, imprison me, paralyze me and keep me from being the fully human, fully alive person that God has created me to be?

Are there things that keep me from being *myself*, knowing *myself*, embracing and celebrating the *self* created in God's image and likeness?

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The spiritual writer and prophet and monk, Thomas Merton, would answer "yes" to this question; in fact he would say that we spend much of our time and energy creating and living out of a self that is false, unreal, superficial...; a self that ultimately enslaves and imprisons us and prevents us from becoming the fully human, fully alive persons that God created us to become.

For Merton, the false-self is the self we present to the world, the self that wants to know how we're doing, the self that measures and compares his or her accomplishments with the accomplishments of others. It's the self that is always competing (secretly or openly) to come in first; the self that becomes obsessed with the culture's emphasis on image and fashion, on material signs of status and success. The false-self is the self that deepens our anxieties, our fears, our insecurities.

The false-self is the self that tells us we will be more real if we only had more stuff, if we could only move in the right crowd, if we could only travel to the right locations, dine in the right restaurants, and dance in the right clubs, wear the right clothes.... Will I sell...? Will they buy me...?

For most people: the false-self tells us that, no matter what I do or what I have, I still don't measure up, so I try harder, work longer, plunge more deeply into the race – strive ever more relentlessly to be in control.

If we're honest, the false-self – when all is said and done – is as stressed, imprisoned, enslaved as that little monkey holding onto the bananas at all cost... even the cost of its life.

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Thomas Merton confessed that he knew a great deal about the false-self because it was his basic, almost full-time, self until he got sick of being spiritual sick – and let go and let God, finding a spiritual path that led him to the Catholic Church and a Trappist monastery, where he discovered – to his amazement and gratitude – his true-self: the self who God intended him to become. For the first time in his life, Merton discovered true *freedom of soul, ...true freedom of soul.*

For Merton, the true-self – the real self – is the antithesis of the false-self: (As we go through these comparisons, reflect on which best describes your 'self'...)

- Where the false-self is willful – the true-self is willing;
- Where the false-self strives for mastery – the true-self trusts the Gospel admonition not to worry and, instead, lives in inner peace;
- Where the false-self compares and competes – the true-self is at home in its own skin;
- Where the false-self is self-conscious, the true-self is poised – not posed – radiating the calm of just being included in God's family;
- while the false-self cares very much what others think of it – the true-self hardly bothers about the opinion of others;
- while the false-self is quick to judge others – the true-self has no need to judge others.

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My sisters and brothers, if we're honest, we've all experienced our false-self in control..., and we've all experienced our true-self guiding our lives. If we hadn't, we wouldn't be here at Mass, we wouldn't be – as our Psalm 63 expresses: "thirsting for God," thirsting for something deeper and more genuine and real in our lives.

A second question for reflection might be: To the extent that I am aware of how much the false-self dominates my life, how do I change? How can I let go of the bananas? How can I become so "sick of being sick" that, like Thomas Merton, I take the plunge – I let go, and let God?

Thomas Merton says: In order to become myself, I must cease to be what I always thought I wanted to be; and in order to find myself, I must go out of myself; and in order to live, I have to die. Jesus said the same thing to his disciples in today's Gospel: "For whoever wants to save one's life, will lose it; but whoever loses one's life for my sake, will save it." In another place he says: "Unless the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat, but if it dies – it produces much fruit."

How can I let go of the bananas? How can I shed the false-self and embrace my true-self, the self God created me to be?

Thomas Merton, all the mystics, all the spiritual giants tell us that developing an interior life..., that prayer, reflection, contemplation, meditation – taking the time to be silent, to listen with the ears of our heart is the channel, the road, the way to developing and embracing, little by little, the true-self and shedding, little by little, the false-self.

In prayer, the mystics remind us, we learn to be real. Without the discipline of prayer, we can't help but remain somewhat inauthentic, somewhat unreal. Without the discipline of prayer, we will continue to live in the unreality of the false-self.

Now – if you've been with me up to this point, you might be saying to yourself: "Well that sounds so nice and simple, but:

- I don't know *how* to pray...;"
- I don't *have the time* to pray...;"
- I don't know *how to become reflective and quiet*, I'm an active person...;"
- I do pray and... I'm still holding on to the bananas! *Isn't there a pill or something I can take* to discover my real self?"
- My life is so crazy, *I just can't do anything more* than I'm doing right now...;"
- I'm too busy!"

Before giving up: We know that summer officially began at 1:01 AM Friday morning! Summer is a perfect time to try something new --- like: developing a deeper prayer life, carving out some time for ourselves, for reflection, to deepen our interior life.

- ✚ Maybe: spending quiet time in the early morning with a cup of coffee on the porch...,
- ✚ Maybe: beginning a prayer journal...,
- ✚ Maybe: taking a reflective walk each day... .

At all Saints, we're offering a book study to help us reflect on creating quiet, prayerful time in our lives. The book we will read together is titled: *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal and Delight in Our Busy Lives* by Wayne Muller. This book looks at how to step outside and deepen the rhythm of quiet reflection and prayer in our busy lives. I'd like to conclude by sharing some passages from the book:

"In the relentless busyness of modern life, we have lost the rhythm between work and rest. ... Our culture invariably supposes that action and accomplishment are better than rest, that doing something – anything – is better than doing nothing. Because of our desire to succeed, to meet these ever-growing expectations, we do not rest. ... In our drive for success, we are seduced by the promises of more: more money, more recognition, more satisfaction, more love, more information, more influence, more possessions, more security. Even when our intentions are noble and our efforts sincere – even when we dedicate our life to the service of others –

the corrosive pressure of frantic overactivity can nonetheless cause suffering in ourselves and others. ... A “successful” life has become a violent enterprise.

“Sabbath time can be a revolutionary challenge to the violence of overwork, mindless accumulation, and the endless multiplication of desires, responsibilities, and accomplishments. Sabbath is a way of being in time where we remember who we are, remember what we know and taste the gifts of spirit and eternity.”

Amen!