

## **Homily – Assert Your Servanthood**

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This past week I finished a wonderful visit with my daughter in Bellevue, Washington outside of Seattle. These days we don't get to spend much time together and it was great to re-bond and reconnect with Katie. The only bad thing from the visit was, once again, the airline experience.

I woke up early on Wednesday to head to the airport. Before leaving the house I received both a text and an email saying that my flight had been cancelled and I had been rebooked on the same flight two days later. I have to say that I have never before experienced a forty-eight-hour delay, and while I might have enjoyed the extra time with my daughter, I had no way to know if the flight two days later would be cancelled once again.

After waiting thirty-five minutes I finally got through to a telephone customer service person, and we started the dance of getting me home earlier.

I'm guessing that most of you have done this dance. You press your case against a bureaucracy or machine that is more concerned with money than customer service.

And, as David Brooks wrote in one of his columns this past week, we live in a day and age in which "the only way not to be a victim is to be venomous."

Do you sometimes feel like this phrase represents these times that we live in? "The only way not to be a victim is to be venomous."

I have to say that this makes me squirm. Do I really need to be venomous with the airline customer service rep? Do I really need to take on the role of victim of the airline or is there another way?

This is a little bit of a leading question, because I certainly believe there is another way.

Today, I want to arm you with yet another tool for a healthy spiritual life. And, our guide to this tool is going to be the words of Paul that we heard this morning in his New Testament letter to the Philippians.

The Apostle Paul is a wonderful spiritual guide to us – both as individuals and also as communities of people that are trying to following the ways of Jesus. Paul seems to

have a deep understanding of how we tick, and also he recognizes the things that make us stumble.

In his writings that we heard today, Paul says *“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”*

No matter where you are in your spiritual journey, these words of wisdom should ring true.

Great and greater spiritual health is achieved when we get outside of our selves. We draw closer to God and to others when we can let go of our egos, when we can diminish our need to control, and when we stop making everything about us.

Now, as I say these words to you, I know they are true, but I still don't find them easy to do.

And, I think part of the reason that I struggle is because when I let go of my ego or my need to control then I feel like a door mat. I feel like I will just be taken advantage of and that makes my sense of self feel diminished. I think this was part of my problem with my airline experience.

Do any of you feel like this as well? Letting go make you feel diminished.

Now, I think this is a normal feeling since asserting one's needs or even beliefs is a core part of healthy self-esteem.

In his book, “The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem”, Nathaniel Branden writes about the importance of self-assertiveness. Using his words...

“Self-assertiveness means honoring one's wants, needs, and values and seeking appropriate forms of their expression. Its opposite is a timid surrender in which you consigning yourself to a perpetual underground where everything that you are lies hidden or stillborn. In this way we avoid confrontation with someone whose values differ from ours. We are able to please, placate, or manipulate someone, or we are able to simply “belong.”

Now, self-assertion does not mean belligerence or inappropriate aggressiveness; it does not mean pushing to the front of the line or knocking other people over; it does not mean upholding my own rights while being blind or indifferent to everyone else's. It simply means the willingness to stand up for myself, to be who I am openly,

to treat myself with respect in all human encounters. It means the refusal to fake my person so that I might be liked. Self-assertiveness means the willingness to stand up for myself, to be who I am openly, to treat myself with respect in all human encounters. To practice self-assertiveness is to live authentically, to speak and act from my innermost convictions and feelings—as a way of life.”

Now, “to practice self-assertiveness consistently one needs the conviction that one’s ideas and wants are important. Unfortunately, this conviction is often lacking. When we were young, many of us received signals conveying that what we thought and felt or wanted was not important. We were taught, in effect, “what’s important is what others want.” And, perhaps we were intimidated by accusations of “selfishness” when we attempted to stand up for ourselves.

It often takes courage to honor what we want and to fight for it. For many people, self-surrender and self-sacrifice are far easier. They do not require the integrity and responsibility that intelligent selfishness requires.”

How do you like that term “intelligent selfishness”. It is not something that we often hear in a sermon. “Intelligent selfishness”

Now, some of you may have a sense of relief in hearing that you don’t need to be a door mat. You may have a sense of comfort and nod your head at the healthy practice of self-assertiveness. Today’s Gospel reading didn’t show Jesus bowing to will of the chief priests and elders. Instead, he refused to answer their questions. I think it is safe to say that Jesus was never a doormat. He practiced healthy self-assertiveness.

However, others of you may be squirming because you are convicted that letting go of self is important. Repeating the earlier words of Paul. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

There is a tension, isn’t there, between selflessness and intelligent selfishness.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.”

And here is my attempt to live into that tension between selflessness and self-assertiveness.

This past week, New York Times columnist, David Brooks, wrote an article in which he shared two models of human development.

The first is what you might call The Four Kinds of Happiness. The lowest kind of happiness is material pleasure, having nice food and clothing and a nice house. Then there is achievement, the pleasure we get from earned and recognized success. Third, there is generativity, the pleasure we get from giving back to others. Finally, the highest kind of happiness is moral joy, the glowing satisfaction we get when we have surrendered ourselves to some noble cause or unconditional love.

The second model of human development is better known and it is Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs. In this second model, we start out by trying to satisfy our physical needs, like hunger or thirst. Once those foundational needs are satisfied we move up to safety needs, as well as economic and physical security. Once those are satisfied we can move up to belonging and love. Then when those are satisfied we can move up to self-esteem. And when that is satisfied we can move up to the pinnacle of development, self-actualization, which is experiencing autonomy and living in a way that expresses our authentic self.

The big difference between these two schemes is that The Four Kinds of Happiness moves from the self-transcendence individual to the relational and finally to the transcendent and collective. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, on the other hand, moves from the collective to the relational and, at its peak, to the individual. In one the pinnacle of human existence is in quieting and transcending the self; in the other it is liberating and actualizing the self.

Most religions and moral systems including much, but not all, of Christianity have aimed for self-quieting and self-transcendence, figuring that the great human problem is selfishness. But around the middle of the 20th century, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers and others aimed to liberate and enlarge the self. They brought us the self-esteem movement, humanistic psychology, and their thinking is still very influential today, even with some Christians.

So, this coming week, I invite you to live into the tension between selflessness and self-assertiveness. I hope you don't have a forty-eight-hour airline delay, but in your interactions be mindful of which way you tend to lean and be self-aware about whether your actions are leading to healthy spirituality or away from it. Are you leaning into your relationship with God, others and self or you hindering those same relationships?