

Sermon: A Transfusion of Being**Scripture: John 15****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: April 28, 2024**

I took a book on my silent retreat at Eastern Point last week by Gil Bailie with the light little title of “The Apocalypse of the Sovereign Self: Recovering the Christian Mystery of Personhood”.¹ Bailie is one of the prominent theologians these days who roots his understanding of scripture and Christianity in the work of anthropologist Rene Girard. One of Rene Girard’s central claims is that to understand human culture specifically and the human being generally you’ve got to place front and center the fact that we are fundamentally imitative beings. We not only become ourselves by imitating others as we first emerge from the womb as fully dependent but we continue to imitate and depend upon others throughout our lives and specifically we imitate one another’s desires – mimetic desire - is what Girard calls it.

The baby in the nursery filled with toys locks eyes onto the single toy in the other baby’s hands is experiencing mimetic desire. My desire for a pair of Blundstones or to go to that Taylor Swift concert is also mimetic desire. The advertising industry banks on it – “see what this person desired and got, oh you want one too?!” It’s mimetic desire that drives our economy, it’s mimetic desire that’s the glue of culture building, it’s mimetic desire that makes us human.

As much as we like to believe differently with the high value we place on being self-made people; independent, autonomous, individual and

¹ Bailie, Gil. *The Apocalypse of the Sovereign Self: Recovering the Christian Mystery of Personhood* (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2023).

original, we really are none of those things. We are more dependent than independent, more connected than autonomous, more composite than individual, more derivative than original. We are dependent on others, we are imitative of others, we derive our meaning and purpose from others, we form our lives, our values, our existence based upon others. As Gil Bailie puts it, we find our center of gravity not inside ourselves by disidentifying with others but outside ourselves through others.²

It's just the truth of the matter of how we are made. So it's not WHETHER we choose to be imitative or not, whether we choose to be our own person or determined by others, the critical question is WHO are we choosing to imitate, WHO are we going to allow ourselves to be determined by. Bob Dylan sings in one of his hit songs from the 70's that "we're gonna have to serve somebody:"

You may be a state trooper, you might be a young Turk
 You may be the head of some big TV network
 You may be rich or poor, you may be blind or lame
 You may be livin' in another country under another name
 But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes, you are
 You're gonna have to serve somebody
 Well, it may be the Devil or it may be the Lord
 But you're gonna have to serve somebody

You may be a construction worker workin' on a home
 Might be livin' in a mansion, you might live in a dome
 You may own guns and you may even own tanks
 You may be somebody's landlord, you may even own banks
 But you're gonna have to serve somebody...³

Dylan's theology is spot on. According to Christianity the human being is made to serve a purpose and we can only become fully ourselves when we are living in service to a mission, under the authority and dictates

² Ibid, p.75

³ Bob Dylan, "Gotta Serve Somebody," in Slow Train Coming, 1979, track 1.

of the one who made us, God.⁴ True human freedom from a Christian perspective is less freedom from constraints or coercion or interference in our lives, but rather true freedom is being aligned and obedient to the way we are made and to the one to whom we are made. We are only free when we are serving and “it may be the devil or it may be the Lord but we’re gonna have to serve somebody.”

The way Jesus describes this reality in John chapter 15 is through the analogy of the vine and branches. “I am the vine you are the branches. If you are disconnected from the vine then you can bear no fruit, you can do nothing. You must abide in me and I in you.” But because God is a God of love and created free creatures to be in love with God from the beginning there has always been the choice for us as to *where* we root, what vine we attach ourselves to and derive ourselves from. Is it going to be the vine of Jesus and his Holy Spirit, the vine of love – “whoever lives in love, lives in God” – is how 1 John puts it - or are we going to attach ourselves to the vine “of this world”. Will we seek approval and affirmation in the eyes of others? Will we derive ourselves in rivalry with others? Will our fragile selves be determined by the successes and failures that define value and worth in this world? Are we going to seek a transfusion of our being from the judgments and perspectives of others?⁵ Or are we going to be determined by that which is our Source, He who is our Cause our Origin, who gave of Himself in Christ and invites us to live in him and him in us, rooted and flowering and bringing forth fruit from there. “A good man brings

⁴ Bailie, Gil, p. 76

⁵ Bailie, Gil, p.109

good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.”⁶

So that’s how Gil Bailie theologizes Rene Girard’s anthropology. Basically in 3 parts – 1. Our becoming takes place through imitation – we were made that way - as humans we were made to grow by way of imitation. 2. The problem comes when we imitate others and get caught in a mimetic spiral of envy which leads to rivalry and then to conflict and violence as we try to constitute ourselves and establish ourselves. This happens in the most intimate settings of the home or the church and it happens in wider settings within our communities our country and globally between countries leading to violent words and exclusion of others from our circles and violent acts and full-blown warfare. And 3. The way out of the mimetic spiral is to turn back to God our Source as soon as we can, to re-root ourselves in the soil of the divine, to reattach our branches to the true vine through imitation of Jesus -the is why Jesus came so we can know how to direct our mimetic desire correctly towards forgiveness, mercy, nonviolence, love, which in practice can often look like a sacrificing of the self but is the way actually to gain our true selves. This is what Jesus means by the enigmatic phrase – “you must lose yourself to find yourself.”⁷ Your center of gravity is not in you but in God. The transfusion of being you seek comes from God not from being over and against others. Your life is not your life but God’s life to which you have been called. Paul says just this in I Corinthians 6:19 – You are not your own.

The protests this week at Columbia University and spreading across the country are, like all mass actions, mimetically formed. That’s not

⁶ Matthew 12:25

⁷ Matthew 10:39

necessarily a bad thing and good can come out of such actions but only when they are rooted in the things of Christ – love and justice and care for others and a commitment to sacrifice and the eschewing of the sacrifice anyone else. As far as they are insisting on an end to the devastating violence in Gaza, taking up their cross to seek that, they are good. But turning on police, calling for the destruction of Israel, threatening Jews, destroying property or otherwise hurting others, then the mimetic dynamic that gathered people towards a good end easily turns energetically towards the mob which has an anger storm cell that spins and escalates out of control and towards violence.

Good for those students who are being moved by love and concern for the Palestinians and calling for an end to war and who can hold that in the midst of compassion for the very real fear that the Jews are experiencing in a world that has hurt them profoundly. We, in our safe suburban neighborhoods, can sit back being disturbed and judging them, scandalized by them, and be equally drawn in through mimetic desire to feel better about ourselves, by shaking our heads and condemning them... cause none of us are free of mimetic influences. All of us are so easily drawn into rivalrous stances taking one side or the other and thereby bolstering or thickening ourselves... or as Gil Bailie puts it – those undergoing the loss of ontological density will attempt to compensate by attracting the attention of others... negatively or positively.⁸ Think of that as a comment on our current age of attention seeking on social media – all those folks undergoing a loss of ontological density and desperate for the feeding that attention from others gives them.

⁸ Bailie, Gil, p. 26

But Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and so he is the one to whom our attention should be placed our mimesis directed. Imitate him and his way is what the church says. If there are competing claims for what the truth is then the way forward is to seek His truth. And if our lives are torqued by the death-dealings of our culture Jesus' life is the one we want to imitate. And that is the life of love of neighbor not rivalry against them, it's the way of the cross not the way of self-satisfied comfort, it's the path of service toward the other not the domination of them in rivalry with them.

We know now what is required since Jesus came and showed us. It's just that we still have trouble believing it. We know who we should imitate, it's just that his way seems so impractical and irresponsible at times. We know what is asked of us – love your neighbor as yourself – it's just that Jesus can't mean that in THIS situation, can he? We know now how the world is saved – through crucified love - it's just that if we had to choose we'd rather be the crucifiers than the crucified. We know whose judgment really counts and is trustworthy, it's just that we really really like the feeling we get as we stand in judgment of others.

Someone said in a church gathering we had this week that they like it when there's a clear takeaway into their week from a sermon and so here it is. Take notice this week of whenever you are in tension, rivalry, or conflict with others – it might just be a feeling inside as you're watching the news, it might be a fight with a loved one, it might be a co-worker that tends to trigger you. Step one notice the tension surface. Step two – consider that you are gaining something from the tension, the rivalry, and investing in it to receive some transfusion of being that you are lacking. It's not simply something that is done to you as the victim but that you are invested in this rivalry in a way that helps define you as a person. Step three: step back.

Step back from it and ask God to give you Godself – Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit - so that you don't have to bolster your-own-self from this rivalry but commit again to following Jesus' way truth and life. Ask Jesus to illuminate that for you. And see if your ontological density doesn't thicken up a little bit. Good luck!