

Know Thyself
Exodus 3:1-12; 4:10-17
June 17, 2007

A belligerent samurai once challenged a Zen master to explain the concept of heaven and hell. But the monk replied with scorn, “You’re nothing but a lout—I can’t waste my time with the likes of you!”

His very honor attacked, the samurai flew into a rage and, pulling his sword from its scabbard, yelled, “I could kill you for your impertinence.”

“That,” the monk calmly replied, “is hell.”

Startled at seeing the truth in what the master pointed out about the fury that had him in its grip, the samurai calmed down, sheathed his sword, and bowed, thanking the monk for the insight.

“And that,” said the monk, “is heaven.”¹

The sudden awakening of the samurai to his own agitated state illustrates the importance of self-awareness, of ongoing attention to one’s internal states. Self-awareness is a critical quality for persons functioning in leadership roles.

We all have leadership opportunities in one form or another. Today we recognize fathers who are leaders in families. We recognize Sunday school teachers and helpers who are leaders of students. Some of you have leadership roles at work. Several of you have leadership responsibilities in our community and schools. As models to our peers in the church and community, we are all leaders. Think for a moment about the venues in which you have leadership roles and any areas in which you have influence over other people.

This summer we’re going to reflect on the theme of Holy Heroes and consider the kind of leaders God calls us to be. The theme coordinates with the Vacation Bible School curriculum, which will encourage our students to be God’s agents of change, just as were many biblical characters.

Leadership gurus in the corporate arena and in the church agree that self-awareness is a critical component of quality leadership. Psychologist Daniel Goleman, an expert on emotional intelligence, says that “self-awareness means having a deep understanding of one’s emotions, as well as one’s strengths and limitations and one’s values and motives. People with strong self-awareness are realistic—neither overly self-critical nor naively hopeful. Rather, they are honest with themselves about themselves. And they are honest about themselves with others, even to the point of being able to laugh at their own foibles.

“Self-aware leaders also understand their values, goals, and dreams. They know where they’re headed and why. They’re attuned to what ‘feels right’ to them.....

“Perhaps the most telling (though least visible) sign of self-awareness is a propensity for self-reflection and thoughtfulness. Self aware people typically find time to reflect quietly, often off by themselves, which allows them to think things over rather than react impulsively.”²

In this season of commencements many inspiring and challenging thoughts have been offered to graduates. I left worship early last week to participate in the commencement for the University of the Pacific School of Dentistry in San Francisco. At the end of the ceremony the Dean issued a final charge to the graduates. I was pleasantly surprised to hear him encourage the new health professionals to take time to reflect daily. He noted how many activities and people will demand their attention each day; however, the most important part of the day is to find a few moments to be still and reflect. He spoke of the first moments of each day he takes to reflect in his office, where he has a large window looking out onto the Golden Gate Bridge.

John O’Donohue in his book on beauty writes, “Each person is the sole inhabitant of their own inner world. No one else can get in there to configure how things are seen.”³ Each of us has an inner house to which we alone have access. Most of us have houses; we can easily describe the style of design, the number of windows, and the color. Consider the interior of our beings. What does our inner house look like? Is it disheveled, dreary, depressed? Are windows clean or is there a film over windows? Are there flowers? Is music playing? Is it beautiful?

It is vital for leaders to be cognizant of our inner homes. Who lives there with us? Are there voices from our family of origin that haunt us and lure us into old and unhealthy patterns? What gifts do we carry from our family, such as humor or a sense of self-reliance? When we reflect on our inner lives, how do we feel? Do we feel blessed, valued, accepted, and worthwhile? Is there an underlying anxiety, as if we are trying to prove our worth to others or gain the approval of superiors? What is hidden in the closets of our inner home? Is there anger seething within that makes its appearance in inappropriate ways? Are there compulsions or addictions driving us?

It is easy for us to get stuck in the routine of life that we become dull to who we really are. We become so accustomed to our actions that we are not always aware of how we are perceived by others. You’ve probably heard the parable of the boiled frog. “If you drop a frog in boiling water, it

will instinctively jump out. But if you place a frog in a pot of cool water and gradually increase the temperature, the frog won't notice that the water's getting hotter. It will sit there until the water boils—and will boil with it. The fate of that poached frog isn't so unlike [many of us] who settle into routine or let small conveniences solidify into large habits—and allow inertia to set in.”⁴ We don't recognize what's happening to us. In order to be effective leaders, and even to be our authentic selves, it is vital to be aware of our emotions, behaviors, values, and motives. It is important to be mindful of our strengths and our limitations.

When God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses was aware of his weaknesses. Perhaps he felt a mixture of self-doubt and humility. He realized that he had little credibility with the people; they knew that he killed an Egyptian who had beaten one of his Hebrew kinfolk. Nor would he have any standing with Pharaoh, whom he was to confront. He had a speech impediment that would make it impossible for him to speak eloquently and earn the respect or command the hearing of the Egyptian ruler. God assured Moses that he was the person God chose to fulfill this role. God would provide the necessary skills. God worked around Moses' speech impediment by calling a team member, Moses' brother Aaron, to be his spokesperson. Moses had the strength of character God needed to accomplish the mission; his limitations could be addressed in such a way that they need not hinder his leadership.

Paul is another biblical leader who grew in self-awareness. In his letter to the Philippians he recounts some of his personal history: “circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Phil. 3:5-6). He was aware of his heritage, his values and passion, and the choices he made in his life. Fortunately for us and our ancestors in the faith, Paul listened to the voice of God which spoke to him in a powerful experience. Paul redirected his energies, passion, and zeal. No longer did he fight against the church, but he became the most powerful missionary for the church of Jesus Christ. Paul could not erase his history, but he integrated it into his new life. He was aware that his heritage impacted his ministry.

In spite of their limitations, both Moses and Paul were called by God. In spite of our weaknesses, each of us is called and gifted by God. We are given strengths to use in the service of God and neighbor and for the fulfillment of our own lives. Awareness of God's call and our abilities help us discover our place in life. Our roles often change as we learn and grow

and as the circumstances of life change. Parenting is one of the most sacred calls of God. Parents of young children find their energies and time focused upon nurturing their children in wholesome ways, meaning that they forgo using their strengths and gifts in areas in which they might otherwise be active. As the needs of other relationships change, we may be called to assist a disabled family member or care for an aging relative. Our passions may change, leading us into new vocations. Awareness of our authentic selves means that life will rarely be stagnant, for when we are self-aware, we will be drawn into ongoing growth.

There is, of course, the option not to probe our inner houses and not to be aware. There is a price to pay for the failure to gain significant self-awareness. The alternatives are not healthy for the leaders, nor for those who follow; indeed they are not healthy for any of our relationships.

One consequence of insufficient self-awareness is the hollow person—someone with no sense of self who works only from the expectations of others. There is no inner core, no authenticity. They merely play the role others expect.

The other danger of a lack of self-awareness is persons who are so absorbed that they are unaware of the needs of others. For self-absorbed leaders, it's all about them. The primary concern is how they are being treated, how they are affected, how they look, how they are responding. Relationships are used to get their own needs met.⁵

Lest we fall into these traps, the Christian church encourages us to use the spiritual discipline called the examination of consciousness. This practice helps sharpen our awareness of positive and negative aspects of our attitudes and behaviors. It helps us pay attention to the emotions and values that motivate us. An examination of consciousness can take various forms, but perhaps the most practical is to take a few moments for reflection at the end of each day. Review the events of the day, noticing how you felt and how you responded to situations. Ask how God's grace has been present throughout your day. Then reflect on how you responded to that grace, either positively or negatively. We might notice patterns in our behavior that we ask God to help us change. When we become aware of an unhealthy reaction to someone, we can make the conscious choice to approach that differently next time. Self-examination in the context of God's presence allows us to turn to express gratitude to God and to call upon God for assistance in changing our attitudes, behaviors, and responses. In addition to self-awareness, we deepen our awareness of God's presence in our lives.

Among the fruits of self-examination is increasing truthfulness. We are real and honest, with no need to impress or hide. Another gift of self-

awareness is greater compassion. The more clearly we know ourselves, the harder it is to judge the weaknesses and failures of others. Self-knowledge allows us to be at peace with ourselves, and consequently make peace with others.⁶

Lao Tzu said, "He who knows others is learned, but he who knows himself is wise."

We live into the wholeness of life and the holiness of leadership when we are aware of who we are in all our fullness, our emotions and attitudes, our strengths and limitations, our values and motives. We grow in self-awareness when we intentionally take time to reflect upon our inner house, to examine our responses to God, to others, and to life. The gifts of self-examination are authenticity, honesty, compassion and peace.

There is an old story about an aged pious rabbi who became fearful as death drew near. His friends chided him: "What! Are you afraid that you'll be reproached that you weren't Moses?"

"No," the rabbi replied, "that I was not myself."

May God grant us the courage to grow in self-awareness that we might fully be who we are called to be.

¹ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995), p. 46.

² Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), p. 40.

³ John O'Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (Harper Perennial, 2005). Quoted by Rev. Lauren Artress, Grace Cathedral, August 21, 2006.

⁴ Goleman, *Primal Leadership*, *ibid*, p. 126.

⁵ Reggie McNeal, *Practicing Greatness: Seven Disciplines of Extraordinary Spiritual Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), p. 33.

⁶ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), pp. 92-93, 98-99.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA