18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Cycle B, 8.5.18
Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15/Ephesians 4:17, 20-24/
John 6:24-35

LIVING BY A NEW IMAGE -
BECOMING A NEW PERSON

So much of life is lived by appearances, by the images we project to one another. It’s not just a teenage preoccupation: worrying about what others think of you..... not just a college student’s dilemma: trying to fit a mold that others will accept and respond to. The world around us is constantly trying to define us -- to present us a picture to which we will feel obliged to conform.

I recall an occasion a few years ago when I fell asleep in front of the television. I woke up to a beautiful scene of a young father with his four year-old son playing in a park with the family dog -- an oversized golden Lab. The scene ended with the dad asleep on a blanket and the young son safely asleep as well on top of his father’s chest, both guarded attentively by the dog. It was such a loving portrait of the intimacy between a father and son. The tenderness between them was poignant and touching. It was so artistically filmed. I wondered what show I was missing.

Then, over the final scene, came the real image I was supposed to absorb. I had caught the tail end of a commercial for Estee Lauder’s then current fragrance for men: “Pleasures.” They were trying a new tact. Rather than a cologne which turns the man into a lion, here was a fragrance that would tame the wild man and make him a loving dad. But the name betrayed what the commercial world hopes we’re always pursuing: pleasures!

A lot of time, effort and money go into creating the images we wish to project onto others or conforming to what others want us to be. Henri Nouwen, the inspiring Catholic author and spiritual leader, wrote in his book The Return of the Prodigal Son:

A little criticism makes me angry, a little rejection makes me depressed. A little praise raises my spirits, and a little success excites me. It takes very little to raise me up or thrust me down. Often I am like a small boat on the ocean, completely at the mercy of its waves. All the time and energy I spend keeping some kind of balance and preventing myself from being tipped over and drowning shows my life is mostly a struggle for survival: not a holy struggle, but an anxious struggle resulting from the mistaken idea that it is the world that defines me.

When I look out onto the sea of faces here at St. Perpetua I see a composite image of the People of God, the community called Church. You are the image of a young boy who was playing his heart out at the summer jazz camp at Acalanes last week, a little girl who is taking her swim competition at Campolindo very seriously this week. You are the figure of a faithful parishioner who week after week, year after year, decade after decade, has gathered in this place of worship. You are
the image of a young couple celebrating your wedding anniversary, striving to make your home a place of enjoyment and welcome, where children can grow and learn to love without counting the cost.

You are the picture of someone who has lost a partner or a friend in death and is struggling to deal with the pain of grief. You are the face of a business professional, bringing to your daily job the values of the gospel, trying to touch the corporate world with Christ’s challenge to love all people and to act justly. You are the icon of a religious sister who has faithfully lived a commitment to God and the Church for many years. I see the image of grace at work in your faces and in your lives.

There are times, however, when God leads us into the desert, as he led the grumbling Israelites of old. In the desert I confront my image which reflects less than the grace and harmony of God -- the malaise each of us can feel, indicating that we are not right with God and with our best selves. Consciously or unconsciously, I can get caught living less than honestly, or, as St. Paul says: living “as the Gentiles do – in the futility of their minds.” Consider some of your own attempts to conform to a self-created image:

• the hard-nosed teenage son or daughter who dare not show any need for their parents;
• the happy-go-lucky, carefree type who can laugh off even the most painful situation, but whose humor masks the pain she is afraid to share with her husband or with a friend;
• the person who is constantly apologetic and thinks he can never do anything right, refusing to accept himself as God created him;
• the harsh father who believes he has to enforce discipline at all costs, fearful lest he be seen by his children as weak or vulnerable;
• the mask of self-righteousness worn by us when we want to project an image of being better than others.

So many images that we slip on throughout the day. In the midst of all of them is one ideal to which we must cling to for dear life and strive to constantly renew. St. Paul encourages us: You should put away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth. Above all else we are to be “like God” -- like God, what a statement! That’s even more blatant than Shakespeare’s Hamlet, who likened human beings to angels. And what ramifications exist for us if we would live up to the truth of being created in God’s image. That means we are to be: creative -- using our talents for the good of the earth and the building up the human community; life-giving -- supporting the values that will insure freedom and quality of life for all people;
forgiving -- willing to hear the grumbling of others and yet being able to overlook faults; compassionate -- experiencing the pain and hunger of the human family as our own, and accepting our part to alleviate that hunger.

We are to hunger for more than bread, and seek that which endures -- reconciliation and kindness, restoration of relationships and justice, joy in place of cynicism, and peace for all people.

To be like God requires nothing less than the “spiritual revolution” which St. Paul calls for -- a fresh, spiritual way of thinking. When our personal image gets clouded by illusion we pretend to be something we’re not. When our best self deteriorates because of excessive desire, all our energies are set on wanting to be something we’re not. St. Paul recognized the unhappy situation he saw in the lives of people who were busy with futile things -- investing in goals that had no lasting meaning. They were working for perishable food, instead of the bread of eternal life. The remedy Paul offered them and us is a life committed to Christ -- a commitment that thrives and gives value to all our daily pursuits. Living according to the gospel renews our way of thinking and acting. It brings us the exciting potential for the glory and fulfillment of that “new person created in God’s image.”

A proverb from Arabia says: “Get close to the seller of perfumes if you want to be fragrant.” Getting close to the Lord in the Eucharist will allow the aroma of his love to permeate all our days and will give us a fragrance that we can bring into the lives of all we meet.

John Kasper, OSFS