

All Saints Sunday
November 3, 2019
The Rev. Scott Walters

Don't you hate it when people you don't like tell you the truth?

Meryl Streep was once one of these people for me. I mean, I like Meryl Streep. But when she played a devil named Miranda who wore Prada, we kind of knew we were allowed to not like her from the get go.

But there's a scene in which she delivers a little speech to her second assistant — a rather frumpy, stridently disinterested in fashion woman named Andy, played by Anne Hathaway. And I think that speech is the truth. It might even encroach on one of those great big capital T Truths about us all.

Maybe you remember it. Andy is dutifully taking notes as outfits... I shouldn't say "outfits", should I?... As ensembles are being put together for a fashion shoot. And when another nervous assistant holds up two seemingly identical belts from which Miranda Priestly might choose, Andy snorts at the absurdity of the apparent gravity of the choice.

Miranda hears her and stops the show, asking what Andy finds so funny. She apologizes. Says the belts look just the same to her and that she's still trying to learn about all this stuff.

"This... 'stuff'?" says Miranda Priestly, with a snarl. "Oh... okay. I see. You think this has nothing to do with you.

"You go to your closet and you select out, oh I don't know, that lumpy blue sweater, for instance, because you're trying to tell the world that you take yourself too seriously to care about what you put on your back. But what you don't know is that that sweater is not just blue, it's not turquoise, it's not lapis, it's actually cerulean.

"You're also blindly unaware of the fact that in 2002, Oscar de la Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns. And then I think it was Yves St Laurent, wasn't it, who showed cerulean military jackets? And then cerulean quickly showed up in the collections of eight different designers. Then it filtered down through the department stores and then trickled on down into some tragic Casual Corner where you, no doubt, fished it out of some clearance bin. However, that blue represents millions of dollars and countless jobs and so it's sort of comical how you think that you've made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry when, in fact, you're wearing the sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room. From a pile of 'stuff.'"

Ardelle reminded me of the scene just this week. We were sitting in the living room, and I'd been reading a book by James Alison titled, *Raising Abel*. Great title, right? He's coming to Lenten Preaching Series next year, by the way. Do come hear him.

Anyway, Ardelle reminded me of the scene because I'd just gifted her with a synopsis and maybe even an entire page or two of what I'd been reading on the other side of the room. I know. Don't you wish you were married to a preacher?

I was reading about something called “mimetic desire.” And the theory is roughly this. We humans share a common illusion. The illusion is that what we desire... what we love or like or want is something deeply intrinsic to our individual selves. It’s the sense that what I desire comes from someplace deep within me and to be “authentic” is to be true to those pure desires and invulnerable to the opinions of other people.

Sound familiar? Don’t we share this sense of what “authenticity” is and why we should strive for it, whether we’re a fourteen year old resisting peer pressure or a fashion editor’s assistant who wants to expose a vicious industry’s cruelties and excesses? Our most authentic identity, in other words, is something we need to defend against the desires and opinions of other people.

“Think Different,” went the ad campaign of a certain company who would exploit our desire for uniqueness to put an iPhone in the pockets of nearly a billion human beings, reassuring each one of us of our hip individuality as they did.

James Alison, and he’s building on the work of Rene Girard, Alison says what Apple understands very well. That we learn what we want by mimicking other people, but we like to think we think different.

But Alison doesn’t want to use this insight to sell us something. He wants us to use it to discover the liberating core of the Christian good news. And part of that good news is not that we’re each unique way deep down. It’s that God has connected us in the most intimate ways — in our desires.

James Alison has much more to say about how badly things go in this world when we deny the true sources of our desires and begin defending ourselves against the idea that we are not unique and independent in our essential selves. He’ll show how when these identities are threatened human societies will descend into rivalries and then violence. Violence that searches for a scapegoat. A scapegoat that on one completely disruptive occasion, hung on a cross. But that’s material for other sermons, other days. Suffice it to say that the consequences of our illusions can be all too real.

Perhaps on this All Saints Sunday, it’s enough to see a need to make peace with the truth that our lives, even our deepest desires and identities, are not our own. And that faith has never been an individual affair. It is, to use the words of St Paul, an “inheritance.”

“In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance,” he writes in Ephesians, “having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will.”

Oh, how I bristle at those references to something essential in me being “destined” or that the way things are may be the result of someone else’s counsel and somebody else’s will. Even God’s. Or the communion of God’s saints’.

But the wisdom of All Saints Day is that our lives have never been our own. In fact, we’ve received the essence of our identities, the wounds as well as the wonders and even our wants, from other people over time.

The question that may haunt us, though, is this: “If I learn even my desires from other people... If even what I love is not essential and original to me, then who am I?”

To this question, especially for a theologian, James Alison once gave an interviewer an astonishingly clear reply. He said, “What is essentially you is *your body*. In your body you are entirely different from anybody else. No one else, not even your twin brother if you had one, has exactly the same physical body as you, born at exactly the same time, occupying exactly the physical space, occupying exactly the same set of relationships... [What] we have to recover is that, actually, our desires are what make us alike; it is our bodies that make us different.”

And so, I put this to you, on All Saints Sunday. That this is a day on which we often speak only of the souls and spirits of those who've gone before us. Today let's celebrate the *embodied* departed, in all their splendid differences.

For if we've learned to love at all, it's been through the very much physical lives of other children of God. People of all shapes and sizes and colors. Bodies with various abilities and disabilities. Bodies we've loved and envied; bodies we've held onto and let go of. Bodies that have held on to us. This brilliant array of visible human uniqueness are the ones we've learned to love by imitating. And this truth about ourselves does not make us less. It makes us more. After all, any communion is more than one, is it not?

Friends, the great cloud of witnesses we celebrate today is a community of flesh and bones across the centuries from whom we've learned even our desires. People who have shaped our love not only for that favorite lumpy blue cerulean sweater, but the deepest parts of our hearts as well.

It is our bodies that make us different. Our desires are what make us alike, interconnected, needful of one another in order to be whole.

If we'll make this essential peace with ourselves, then the communion of saints we actually call the Body of Christ will continue to shape the parts of our selves that really can be changed and expanded and healed... The Body of Christ can shape our loves a little more into the likeness of Jesus's over time, and in the process, we may find our whole selves a little less alone in the world, and a little less violent to those around us when we do.

I'll leave you with an unexpected vision of what discovering one's identity as a member of this Body of Christ might actually feel like. I won't ask you to put on looser clothing and roll out your yoga mats. But our daughter recently wrote a paper on adolescence. Unsurprisingly, it had a lot to say about what it means to become at home in one's body. But, surprisingly perhaps, she ended it, not with further explanations or references, but with a yoga sequence, typed out pose by pose. Because this is how she came to be ever more at home in the one and only body God made to be only her. Here's how it ended:

"Gently return to your surroundings. Return to your senses: wiggling fingers and toes, noticing the sounds and smells and tastes of this space. Remember, then, that you too are a part of this space. As you're ready, lift yourself back up into a cross-legged seat. Bow your head to your heart, prayer hands at your chest if you'd like, and send gratitude to all the people in this space for practicing today. Remember that you are one of those people, too. Know that you are ready to carry this gratitude out into the world with you. Just as other people give you life, you, too, give other people life."

A blessed All Saints Day to all you embodied and beloved saints of God. And thanks be to God for the saints now gone whose lives and loves have made us so.