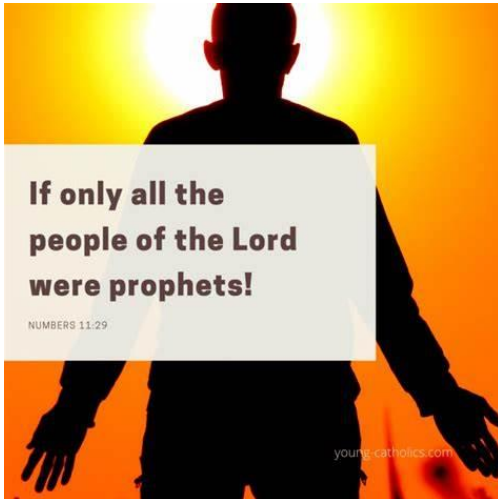


## Homily for Sunday, Sept. 26, 2021 – 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time



We were once told--during our seminary formation years--95% of all the problems that will come across our desks as future priests (if we were ordained) would stem from two fundamental sources: peoples' *false image of God* and peoples' *false image of self*. These false images live in all of us, priests included. However, I'm convinced the number is not 95%, but 99.99%. Equally convincing to me is that the false image of God and the false image of self are inherently connected. The moment you create God in your own image (and I do it all the time), the revelation of the true God is abandoned, and an idol is born. This god we have given birth to is usually small, tame, petty, legalistic, stingy, controlling,

punitive, and never takes delight in you. This type of "god" is more in love with maintaining law and order and only loves you on the condition that you maintain that law and order in your own life. Everything must fit and function inside a well-defined box where God is both police and judge.

Moses is dealing with peoples' image of God in the first reading from the Book of Numbers; their God-image is false, because it's way too small. We heard that God's Spirit was given to 72 elders, 70 of which were in the tent where they were supposed to be. Two elders, Eldad and Medad, were not in the tent when this commissioning, this "ordaining" was taking place. Yet, the Spirit was still on them. Moses scolding Joshua said that God works inside the tent and outside in the camp. Do not put limits on what God has not put limits on. We have all done this in our own way. We have all, after receiving forgiveness from God, found some reason not to forgive ourselves. That is true of every person sitting in the pews before me. The reason we put limits on what God can and cannot do is because we have first put limits on what God is and what God is not. If I believe in a god who is not all-merciful, then it becomes all the easier for me to believe God should forgive this person but definitely not that person over there (because we all know what that person over there is like). Mercy never leaves the tent.

If I limit God and God's work to tents I set up in my mind, or the tent of the Church, then I can justify the exclusion of every Eldad and Medad I come across: those non-practicing Catholics, those misguided Protestants, those condemned atheists, those perverse gay people, those irresponsible addicts, those immoral prostitutes, those lazy unemployed people,...there's no way God's Spirit can be on them! Moses as well as Jesus in the gospel remind us to honor the Spirit who knows no bounds. The Spirit, like the wind itself, blows where it may, and where it blows good always comes about. It will not be limited to a single tent when it can have the whole camp, the entire world. It will not be satisfied with 99 sheep, when it can have 100! If God gave the Spirit permission to blow over the entire world, who are we to say, "Here, but not there"? Who are we to say, "Deeds of power should be stopped, Lord, because they are not officially

sanctioned by us.” Notice the beef the disciples have with the person casting out demons. Their grumbling is not that this person was not following Jesus; their gripe is with the fact that **“he was not following us!”** This person didn’t fit into our box, so we tried to shut him down. That’s the false image of God. If we are to grow into a larger, truer image of God, the smaller image must give way, must actually die. Same with the True Self. If the True Self is to emerge, the False Self must die. Let’s just admit it, none of us are very good at letting anything die with in us. It’s so humbling.

Now a word about the false image of self, that other albatross we all have around our necks. When speaking about letting things die that are not helping us become the people we were always meant to be, Jesus uses stark language of cutting off limbs and plucking out eyes. Even those who like to take the Bible literally make some adjustments. I know this because I’ve never seen any one-eye or one-armed Fundamentalist around. But just because I haven’t, does not mean for a minute, I have not seen the damage done by false images of self.

Within our makeup is something called our Ego, a reflection of our True Self, but not the True Self. When we get fixed on our ego, thinking our ego is the True Self, when it is merely a reflection of the True Self, we create the False Self. A healthy ego is a good thing. An unhealthy ego leads to narcissism, a fixation on our looks or our reputation. This False Self is fragile, needy, and terribly insecure. The false self cares only about itself, about looking good in the eyes of others, and about its own security. It is not concerned about being good only about looking good. It needs to be affirmed, justified, and offered incense 24/7. The False Self is also terribly restless. It has to come across as having all the answer and can never admit defeat or that it might have been wrong. It is highly offendable, where the True Self rests in God, finds its security in God alone, and cannot be offended. Joshua, in the first reading, as well as the disciples in the gospel, are highly offended; they clearly are working out of their False Self and not their True Self. Their underdeveloped egos were offended that God would give power from on high to those who, obviously, were not as qualified as they were. How dare someone cast out demons when we are supposed to be the only demon-caster-outers!

The False Self has to die in them, and in us, if the True Self is to emerge. The defeat of the False Self causes us to collapse into our True Self, the self that is vulnerable, terrified, afraid. No wonder the False Self resists this. When Jesus speaks about the grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying; when he speaks about letting go of our lives for the sake of the gospel, I believe he is talking about the death of the False Self within each of us. Jesus did not use the language of Jungian psychology, but he did speak of letting go of hands, feet, and eyes--of anything for that matter--that prevents our True Selves from emerging.

Jesus did his own soul work, not as God with special powers, but as one who had forsaken his powers to be like you and me; that’s why I can trust him. He confronted his shadow, his dark side, long before he challenged us to take the log out of our own eyes. Before he talked about the Son of Man suffering and dying, he himself went to the desert. There, if there was any False

Self in him, it died in the desert. He underwent his own initiation rite and initiation rites are only transformative if something within us dies.

These 19 months of COVID have taught me a lot about myself and about parishioners, and not all of it is flattering. I have seen how much the false self is still very much in charge in myself and others. With the health authority and our bishop doing their best to curb the virus and save lives, it is often met with arrogance, hate mail, and threats. There is nothing Christian about it, and some of these people have been sitting in the pews for 40 years listening to their own egos rather than the gospel. In these people, saving lives is obviously not as important as keeping their false self intact. No dying, no changing, no transformation, no limbs cut off, no eyes plucked out is going to happen in these people. Why would it, when you think you're perfect already? When you have done absolutely no work on yourself eventually you will prevent good work, deeds of power, from being done in others. The Good News is that the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Truth, moves freely from our little tent and into the entire world without our permission. There it comes to rest on people empowering them to be prophets, prophets they always were but never knew.

Fr. Phil