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Becoming Real

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In Galatians 2:19-20, Paul writes, as paraphrased in the Message bible: *"What actually took place is this: I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God, and it didn't work. So I quit being a "law man" so that I could be God's man. Christ's life showed me how, and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not "mine," but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I am not going to go back on that."* This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Is anyone else tired of trying to become the "best version of themselves" or is it just me? (btw - when I was typing my sermon, Google Docs auto-completed "version of themselves" after I typed the word "best" haha)

For me, it's fairly exhausting trying to become the "best version of myself". Because no matter how hard I work to become the best version of myself...I still wake up as the actual version of myself. This elusive "best version of myself" has good posture, only eats his allotted calories per day, always lovingly and actively listens to his children, and would never swear at other drivers on the road. His hair has stopped thinning, he has no need for fiber supplements, and he's worn through twelve study bibles out of extreme notetaking, wear, and water damage from being soaked by both joyful and repentful tears.

I try to be like that guy. But I can never keep it up for very long. The actual version of myself carries his stress in his shoulders and can put down a quart of Pirate's Bounty ice cream by scooping it out of the carton with a family size bag of Golden Oreos. Actual me soft-rages when his kids chew on popcorn with their mouths open, and he can make a sailor blush with colorful language used

in his car while driving. His body continues to age at least one year every 365 days and if I'm really honest... on some particularly "actual" days... actual me fantasizes about faking his own death and escaping to somewhere he never has to talk or write or think about all this God-stuff again. Oof! I feel sorry for THAT guy!

I can vacillate remarkably quickly between the "best" and actual versions of myself. True story. The other day I was walking into the grocery store and noticed a piece of litter on the sidewalk. So, I picked it up and threw it out thinking: "I'm... creation caring!" And no sooner did the trash leave my hand when the next thought to enter my mind was... "I wonder if anyone saw me pick up that litter. I bet they must think I'm so... humble for doing that."

Why are we so obsessed with becoming the best version of ourselves lately? I think it comes down to a simple question each of us spends our lives trying to answer: Am I loveable? AM I WORTHY OF LOVE?

One of the ways we can respond to this question is by trying to get our act together. We think "I'm gonna MAKE myself worthy of love!" Whether it's the love of others, ourselves or even God. We think: "I know! I'll become the best version of myself and THEN there'll be no choice BUT to love who I am..." I'm sure we've all felt this pull to fix ourselves up from time to time. Even so, I can say from my own experience... It's exhausting trying to get my act together.

I love the exasperation in Paul's letter: "What actually took place is this: I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God, and it didn't work. So, I quit being a "law man" so that I could be God's man." So why didn't it work Pauli? You tried keeping rules and working your head off to please God to make God love you more... WHY didn't it work?

I'd like to think of it this way. I'm a father of three daughters. And let's say I came home from Prince of Peace and one of my kids excitedly greets me when I walk in the door and says: "Dad! Come

see! I cleaned my room. It's spotless! I even helped my sister clean HER room too. And I was really nice to her. I mean super nice, (even though she was kinda mean to me). But I didn't stop there. I took out the trash and recycling, and then I saw the lawn could use some work. So, I started pulling weeds. Look at my hands, they're raw from all the weeds I pulled! But I pulled every single one of 'em that I could find... So dad... NOW do you love me? NOW am I lovable to you?"

Ugh...It would break my heart if one of my children said that to me.

Paul's best efforts to keep all the rules to please God (to make God love him) didn't work because God already loved him. And when we're loved... As we are... we can finally be real.

We can stop trying to be the best version of ourselves when we realize that God sees the current version of ourselves who's trying so doggone hard to get it together and God sees the past version of ourselves who really dropped the ball when it counted and God sees the future version of ourselves who will no doubt manage to disappoint... and God sees the worst version of ourselves in that moment we really regret, that we're haunted by, that we don't want to acknowledge... God sees the whole movie of our lives... and says: you're worthy.

And I don't mean "worthy" in the sense of "you've earned it. Way to go!" I mean it in the sense of, chop the "Y" off of "worthy" and you're left with... worth. Like how you might say: "I'm kinda THIRSTy" or "It's pretty WINDy outside" YOU are awfully WORTHy... to God.

When you and I begin to live as people who are loved in as-is condition, flaws and all because we have a worth to God, because we are lovable to God, we're set free. This is the Freedom of a Christian that Martin Luther so passionately wrote about!

Luther, the Augustinian monk who worked so hard to become the best version of himself that he was driven to utter despair... and was then driven to the cross when he had nowhere left to go.

The cross where God proved God's outrageous affection for us in and through Christ. As Paul wrote: "The life you see me living is not "mine," but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Here's a thought exercise. If humanity's story had played out differently, and no one had ever chosen sin... except you... do you believe that Jesus still would have shown up... for just you? I think the Jesus who talks foolish talk about shepherds leaving 99 for one, and women searching high and low for a single lost coin and then throwing a party worth more than the lost coin they find, and of fathers who look down the road every day awaiting a wayward child they love to come home...

The Jesus who talks like that... I don't think He'd have any hesitation to give Himself for just you. And He wouldn't gripe about it, or huff and puff, or give you sideways glances. "...the Son of God, who loved you and gave himself for you" would do it even if it was for only you. And yes, Jesus' love is for all people. No exceptions! But that also includes you.

Why am I harping on this?

For me it's because when I spend too much time cooped up in seminaries and pulpits and church buildings and helping and giving and learning and studying and teaching...

We can know it, but still forget it! And when you know it, now you are finally free to show it.

Luther said, "God doesn't need your good works, but your neighbor does..." Now you're set free to love your neighbor with no ulterior motives...

No 2-4-1: "I'll love you so God will love me" hogwash. It's the real deal.

People begin to become... we become... the best versions of themselves when we no longer have to be the best version of themselves. When we can be real and still be loved. Because when we are loved, we become Real.

There's a masterful passage that touches on this thought from the book The Velveteen Rabbit, where the wise old rocking horse says this to the new and curious stuffed velveteen rabbit: "Real

isn't how you are made,' said the Skin Horse. 'It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.' 'Does it hurt?' asked the Rabbit.

'Sometimes,' said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. 'When you are Real you don't mind being hurt.'

'Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,' he asked, 'or bit by bit?'

'It doesn't happen all at once,' said the Skin Horse. 'You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.'

When you and I begin to live as people who are loved in as-is condition, flaws and all, because we have a worth to God, because we are lovable to God, we're set free. We become... REAL.

On this Labor Day weekend, may we also rest from the work of trying to get God to love us more. Because when we let God fully, deeply, unconditionally, lavishly, and relentlessly love the actual version of ourselves with no extra work on our part, strangely enough... we become the best version of ourselves.