

“Which Version of Me is the Best Version of Me?”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Pastor, Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 11/15/20

Galatians 5

Many years ago as a graduate student, I remember one particular professor who also happened to be my doctoral advisor and was a bit unpredictable—meaning one day he would be kind and helpful and the next day he would be rude and hostile. While I thought I was the only one seeing this in him, because I was also a Graduate Assistant and I saw this professor nearly every day, I was so relieved when one of my classmates, Anthony, turned to me just before our research class was to begin one day and said, “which one do you think will show up today? Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde?” I felt so relieved to know that I wasn’t the only one seeing these two sides of Dr. James, but I worked hard not show my feelings about the whole thing. Dr. James was also my boss, so I faintly chuckled and silently prayed that Dr. Jekyll showed up that day.

I share this only to illustrate that we each have two sides. The Apostle Paul likened this dichotomy within ourselves to that “of the Spirit” and that “of the flesh.” However, such states of being are as old as humans themselves. From my own tribe, we know the ancient Choctaws believed we each had two spirits, shilup and shilombosh. Shilup is what we typically refer to as our individual “spirit” but shilombosh refers to our “shadow.” This isn’t exclusive, by any means, to the Choctaw. Most all cultures have some version of this dichotomy of ourselves, because it seems to be pronounced within human existence itself: Two sides of the same coin.

As Saint Paul rightly points out the negatives of our nature, and encourages us to cling instead to the fruits of the Spirit as our newly minted, now dominant way of being—reminding us to put off the “flesh” and instead follow Jesus’ emphasis of loving our neighbor truly with “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control” (Galatians 5). This is what love looks like. This is our Dr. Jekyll, so let it shine brightest, right? However, we should not be ignorant to the existence of our “Mr. Hyde,” for it does exist. Our shilombosh is impossible to completely disassociate from.

Father Thomas Keating wrote of these two-selves in his book “Open Mind, Open Heart” when he says, “As the deep peace flowing from contemplative prayer releases our emotional blocks, insights into the dark side of our personality emerge and multiply. We blissfully imagine that we do good to our families, friends, and-business or professional associates for the best of reasons, but when this dynamism begins to operate in us, our so-called good intentions look like a pile of dirty dishrags. We perceive that we are not as generous as we had believed. This happens because the divine light is shining brighter in our hearts. Divine love, by its very nature, accuses us of our innate selfishness.” This reminds me of Jesus (our Divine light and Divine love) commanding us to sincerely “be the light.” He said, “You are the light of the world.” And then he says, “Do not hide your light; instead shine it brightly that people may see the good gifts given by God to you so that they too may worship the Lord” (Matthew 5). I believe these gifts square with the ones Paul has already shared as the “fruits of the Spirit.” However, we cannot move forward unless the light is fully shining, exposing even our own “dark side” too. We must be honest with ourselves and not run away from that part of ourselves. I would even say that exposing our

darker nature becomes our strength—as Paul already taught us that God’s strength is made perfect in our weakness, right?

Author and our community’s long time friend Elizabeth O’Connor wrote that “Strangely enough we strengthen love in ourselves when we raise into consciousness the shadow side of our lives. Conversely, when we keep negative feelings out of sight, they smother the love that seems to lie deeper and closer to the real self. This is probably why there is so much pain in not loving. The life that is not able to express the love which is so integral to it grows deformed.” We must let the light side do its job and supersede our shadow side. This struggle is a natural one, but if we choose to stay in the light and not simply hide or ignore our “Mr. Hyde,” there is a greater sense of happiness to follow—or as Paul called it in Galatians 5, a “freedom”—not a selfish freedom but a giving freedom. And do we want to be free? Of course we do.

This can also be understood in terms of our Ego-Self versus our True Self. Deepak Chopra says we have two sides to ourselves as well. He describes our True Self as that which exists with certainty, stability, clarity, peace, and love—and contrasts that with our competing Ego-Self which exists in self-preservation, selfishness, fear, and uncertainty. He says, “The true self understands what you really want and what you really need to be joyful. It creates a much stronger, more expansive foundation for your life than any the ego-self can provide, since that is rooted in fear and insecurity.”

So, I admonish us all to think carefully about which part of our humanity we want to dominate our lives. Do we want to live out of fear and insecurity, clinging to the fruits of the flesh, like hatred, division, and idolatry OR instead do we prefer to live into our True-Selves, our Light-Selves and live into the Spirit’s call for love, joy, peace, and unity. Let us choose. And many of us today will choose to take the torch of life into our hands and say, “I choose life over death. I choose honesty over deception. I choose hope over fear.” So let us find ways to nourish this light-side versus our shadow-side, understanding that our shadow side does not disappear entirely, but simply being aware of it makes it much easier to manage. The pain never goes away completely, but the hope we live into seems to take over. So, which version of me is the best version of me? The truer version of me. So, let us live together in that place where honesty prevails and light transcends it all.

Shalom