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THE WAY I AM

“You’ve got to take me the way I am!” How often have you heard someone say that? Or have you said it yourself? It means: “Why should I change? You make the changes to adjust to me as I am right now and as I intend to be later.” Isn’t this the American way? Individualism. Of course, there’s a major flaw in this declaration of independence. I being the way I am is going to run into a wall, namely, you being the way you are. But I continue with my unbending assertion: you conform to my reality, the one I set up. Don’t argue. Submit.

This little scene is unhappily a scenario too often met in this twenty-first century America, the land of the free. Is the drama a comedy or a tragedy? Well, both. The comic element is thinking I can prevail by insisting on how I shape my personal universe. I’m so sure, really positive, until I trip over my own presumption and take a fall. Who’s laughing now? The surprise is all on me. Those who know me have seen it coming, but I listen only to what my own voice declares. Oops! Didn’t see the slippery slope that landed me on my face. The author of Proverbs knew the type. “A fool takes no pleasure in understanding but only in expressing an opinion” (Pr 18:2).

Now for the sadness, the shadow of the tragic. No change means no growth and God has given us human life so we can grow. We’re not meant to stop short in our development. How often in Scripture we read the phrase “stiffnecked.” That signifies a rigidity and resistance. Describing the unhappy Zedekiah, Second Chronicles relates, “He became stiffnecked and hardened his heart” (36:13).

The life we have is a seed meant to blossom, destined for fresh fruitfulness as the years mount up. The flowers of my youth are not the same as what middle age and my older decades show forth. Just as our outward appearance does not remain what it was, so our inward being should find in God a life-giving spring to refresh our dryness and wash away the gravel of our faults. Others may offer us a cooling drink from their own wisdom. “The words of the mouth are deep waters” (Pr 18: 4).

If we are rich in our own estimation, we need to pay attention to the admonitions of Jesus, “Woe to you who are rich for you have received your consolation” (Lk 6:24). Being sure about myself, I don’t recognize my own poverty. I am so full of Me. “Woe to you who are full now, for you shall hunger” (25). When the staging we have erected for ourselves is knocked down by some unforeseen blow, we are forced to stop to look at what we are building up. And in stopping, we often see how the edifice is all of human making and the mark of God is not on it. Then we pause. The fast pace of moving ahead where I want to go has to slow down. I begin to weigh whether my energy should be poured out as it has been. What have I been missing?

Has our theme song too long been the Frank Sinatra hit, “I Did It My Way”? That music may be worthwhile for an interlude but not for the marked rhythm of ongoing life. “The measure you give will be the measure you get back” (6:38).

It is not only materialists who want things to be done their way. Religious people who are eager for spiritual progress can become too sure of their appraisal of a situation. Then they close their ears to what others suggest. St. John of the Cross describes those with “a certain indiscreet zeal. They reprove others and sometimes even feel the impulse to do so angrily...setting themselves up as lords of virtue” (Dark Night, Book 1, Ch 5: 2). St. Teresa of Avila writes in the same vein of people who “canonize the feelings in their minds and would like others to do so” (Interior Castle, Third Dwelling Places, Ch. 2:3).

To accept the Good News of Jesus is to open ourselves to the summons of grace which always uncovers wider horizons. We don't stay stuck where we are, digging a hole that we want to fill with our own desires. This is the sad emptiness so often presented by secular blandishments. “Be yourself.” Yes, be the self God made you to be, formed in the divine image and destined to wear “a glorious mantle instead of a listless spirit” (Is 61:3).

Part of the price is to be willing to admit we need to work on the current image we see in the mirror of our psyche. We're meant to rise from where we are to a higher level of human greatness. St. Paul who struggled to let go of what he had once been so sure of, urges us to take the steps to change, “Put on a new person, one who grows in knowledge as formed anew in the image of the Creator” (Col 3:10). Yes, I am the way I am. But that way calls for lots of improvement.

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