

I was thinking this week how complicated life can be. I was with several college students last weekend down in North Carolina and when I asked them what they wanted to be, none of them knew. I could tell they had been asked that question a lot and it was getting to them, because as soon as I asked it, they looked haunted and anxious. I felt sorry for them. I think it's because there are so many choices these days. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics lists over 800 occupations, just in the United States.

It made me long for the old days. Not when I was a kid, but even before that. Back when there were just two careers. You were either a hunter, or if you didn't want to be a hunter, you could be a gatherer. College graduates had it a lot easier back then. They could even be both. They could hunt one day, and gather the next day. My father was a hunter. Growing up, he'd always wanted to be a gatherer, but his father, my grandfather, told him, "Oh, no you won't. There'll be no gatherers in the Gulley family. We're hunters." But when my grandfather died, my dad quit his job as a hunter and became a gatherer and was much happier.

But young people today, they have so many choices. And most jobs are so complicated, you need specialized training, sometimes years of it. Then after you've trained for it, you might discover you don't even like it.

You know what the hardest thing to be is? It's the absolute hardest thing to be, but those who become it report the highest satisfaction in life. This is very interesting. It's the hardest thing to be, but also the most satisfying. Everyone I know who is this, is glad they are. Any guesses? The hardest thing to be?

Yourself. Yourself. The hardest thing to be is yourself. Because just as soon as you try to be yourself, there are people who want you to be something or someone else.

These past several weeks we've been thinking about what it means to be fully alive, to live at your utmost creativity, at your highest capacity. The psychiatrist Abraham Maslow called such people self-actualized. We've been saying such people have awakened souls. One trait of soul-awakened people is their ability to be autonomous. When we say someone is autonomous we mean they are independent, self-directing, self-governing. That is, they aren't slaves to their culture or environment. While they don't go out of their way to be different just for the sake of being different, they are nevertheless able to stand apart from society when their conscience demands it. In the Bible, and in history, these are often the people God raises up as prophets because of their ability to stand tall and true in the face of cultural pressure and societal rejection.

I am thinking now of John Woolman, who in 1746, at the age of 26, began prophesying against slavery, and persisted and persisted, even when his fellow Quakers discouraged his efforts.

I am thinking now of Pete Seeger, who died this past week at the age of 94. In 1955, he was subpoenaed to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee, where he was asked to identify his friends and associates. He looked Congress straight in the eye and said, "I am not going to answer any questions as to my associations, my philosophical or religious beliefs or my political beliefs, or how I voted in any election, or any of these private affairs. I think these are improper questions for any American to be asked, especially under such compulsion as this." Then he asked for his guitar so he could sing them a song. He was indicted for contempt of Congress, found guilty, but did not waver. Seven years later, his conviction was overturned.

I am thinking now of Jesus, who was dragged before his accusers, and whipped and cursed and hung on a cross, caring nothing for the good opinion of others or the smile of the world, but remaining faithful to his vision of a divine kingdom not for some, but for all, rooted in compassion, founded in justice, where wealth and power were of no regard. And for that vision, and for that kingdom, he gave his life. To make certain his accusers understood that, he said it clear. "You are not taking my life. I am giving it."

People like this do not need the law. They do not need the Ten Commandments, nor the Sermon on the Mount. You could remove every law and rule from every constitution and every sacred book, and these people, living from the clarity of their internal code, would harm no one. They would abuse no one, take advantage of no one, live at no one else's expense.

That is what Abraham Maslow meant when he said self-actualized people were autonomous. That is what we mean when we say someone has an awakened soul. And these are the men and women, time and again, whom God uses to move humanity forward. They are the people who know how to be themselves.

Ironically, autonomy is such an admirable trait that many will claim to have it just to win the approval of smaller minds and smaller people. (Hint: Anyone who struts around claiming to be their own man, isn't.) Under the banner of autonomy and rugged-individualism they will wield whatever power they hold to keep others down, then smile humbly while others boast of their bravery. But autonomy used to keep others down is tyranny. While autonomous people live from an internal code, they do so with a deep regard for the rights and freedoms of others. They need no rule book to tell them how to love, how to care, how to heal, how to uplift, how to think, or what to believe.

You will meet people who will say, “But the Bible says...but *Faith and Practice* says...but the church says...but God says...” And those sources can always inform your decisions, but you will be better served by developing your own internal compass, the Light within you, and to follow that Inward Light with all the grace, courage, fortitude, and faithfulness you can. Even if the mob should disapprove.

I want to close with a beautiful little poem by John Morley. I don't often include poetry in my messages, but this morning I shall. It is called *The Smile of the World*.

And what is this smile of the world, to win which we are bidden to sacrifice our moral manhood; this frown of the world, whose terrors are more awful than the withering up of truth and the slow going out of light within the souls of us?

Consider the triviality of life and conversation and purpose, in the bulk of those whose approval is held out for our prize and the mark of our high calling.

Measure, if you can, the empire over them of prejudice unadulterated by a single element of rationality, and weigh, if you can, the huge burden of custom, unrelieved by a single leavening particle of fresh thought.

Ponder the share which selfishness and love of ease have in the vitality and the maintenance of the opinions that we are forbidden to dispute.

Then how pitiful a thing seems the approval or disapproval of these creatures of the conventions of the hour, as one figures the merciless vastness of the universe of matter sweeping us headlong through viewless space; as one hears the wail of misery that is forever ascending to the deaf gods; as one counts the little tale of the years that separate us from eternal silence.

In light of these things, a man should surely dare to live his small span of life with little heed of the common speech upon him or his life, only caring that his days may be full of reality, and his conversation of truth-speaking and wholeness.

Be yourself. But be your best self, and fear not the frown of the world.