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Following Jesus –  
*Two Essentials*

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# Following Jesus – *Two Essentials*

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When I was fifty, I entered a transition. It was a difficult time, a time of confusion, upheaval and disorder. Needless to say I was desperate to find something that would help me make sense of what I was experiencing. Thankfully the enlightenment came. In a moment of insight, in fact while I was grocery shopping, I connected what was happening to me with a transition in the life of Jesus. When Jesus was about thirty years old, he left Nazareth to begin a public ministry. This was a major change in his life. It involved two significant things. Firstly, at the Jordan River he had a profound experience of his identity as the Beloved Son of God. Secondly, during a time of retreat in the desert he said ‘no’ to the powerful demons that sought to pull him into the seductive world of the ego also known as the false self. In saying ‘yes’ to his true self and ‘no’ to the false self Jesus was then ready to practice and preach the Kingdom.

It became clear to me that what Jesus did in his transition I needed to do in mine. His story was my story. I needed to focus on claiming my belovedness. I also needed to explore the ways the false self was operating in my life. I had a definite path for my transition and it brought me through it. But, and this is the point, the work of claiming my belovedness and taming my false self hasn’t stopped. It is an ongoing process. In fact, I now believe that doing these two things is essential for our discipleship, for our following of Jesus. Let me elaborate.

## OUR BELOVEDNESS

When Jesus was baptised in the Jordan River, he heard Abba say to him, “You are my Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” This was a hugely significant experience in the life of Jesus. It enabled him to claim his belovedness and it confirmed him in his identity.

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Jesus knew that he was Abba's Beloved Son, and that Abba took delight in him. The experience of his belovedness was the great anchor in Jesus' life and it freed him to reach out to everyone and everything in an affirming and non-possessive way. Because he knew he was uniquely and unconditionally loved by Abba, Jesus was not controlled by fear and by the forces of evil. He was free of the negative feelings that come from the experience of inadequacy and insecurity. He was also able to deal with otherness and diversity without feeling threatened. Jesus' awareness of his belovedness made him a truly inclusive person, the most compassionate human being who has ever lived.

Like Jesus we too are Abba's beloved daughters and sons. We belong to Abba. Abba loves us unconditionally and takes delight in us. This is the deepest and most important reality in our lives. It is known as our *belovedness*. It means that we do not have to earn love or justify our existence. Our belovedness is our original blessing, our core truth, our deepest identity. We were born with our belovedness, and we will die with our belovedness. Because of our belovedness we can be certain that unconditional love will have the last word, the final say. In the words of Pope Francis, "When everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved."

I think it is fair to say that the majority of people are *not* aware of their belovedness. They do not see themselves as God's beloved daughters and sons and they do not know that Abba is pleased with them. Perhaps the way religion is perceived and received has something to do with this. But so has low self-esteem. If we are to believe that the most common and pervasive human wound is low self-esteem it is understandable that the acceptance of our belovedness is a step too far. Poor self-worth tends to stifle all our attempts to see ourselves in a positive way, including religious ones. And yet, paradoxically, our willingness to claim our belovedness is perhaps one of the best ways to heal our feelings of inadequacy. Our inability to see ourselves as beloved doesn't change the fact that we are beloved. Our belovedness is an objective reality. No one can take it away from us and nothing including the mistakes we have made in the past and the problems we may have in the present can taint it, contaminate it or destroy it. Because it is the image of God within us, it is eternal.

#### PRAYER AND PLAY

The *challenge* then for us is to become aware of our belovedness, to claim it. Claiming our belovedness is not a quick fix. It is a process that takes time and a willingness to do things that are helpful, indeed necessary. Needless to say, one of these things is

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prayer especially contemplative *prayer*. Contemplative prayer is forms of prayer that allow us to be and to receive, that “help us to relax into the reality of being loved,” to quote the late Michael Paul Gallagher. Another thing that helps us claim our belovedness is *play*. On the face of it play may not seem to have anything to do with the acceptance of unconditional love. Surely it is something for children only. Not so! It is a fact that one of the deepest longings in the human heart is to just ‘be’. If we see play as something that allows us to be and to rejoice in the act of being then our attitude to it can change. Play is one of the few things in our busy consumerist culture that serves to remind us that we are called human beings not human doers. This is why it is necessary for us to protect the weekly Sabbath as a day of joy and freedom from work. We need at least one day in the week to remind ourselves that who we *are* is more important than what we *do*. Our belovedness is who we are. To claim our belovedness it is helpful to make time for all forms of non-productive activity including play.

The following little verse called *Late Fragment* written by Raymond Carver is a beautiful description of the deep longing in our hearts to see ourselves as beloved:

*“And did you get what  
You wanted from this life, even so?  
I did.  
And what did you want?  
To call myself beloved, to feel myself,  
Beloved on the earth.”*

Jesus saw himself beloved on the earth, he felt himself beloved on the earth. His belovedness came from the relationship Abba had with him and it was the anchor in his life. Jesus wants us to have the same experience. We can make it happen. We need to make it happen. If we do, we will feel sufficient and secure and be able to love others freely in a non-possessive way. It is with good reason that Richard Rohr, spiritual writer and founder of the Centre for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, believes that the primary task of religion is to reconnect us with our original identity. Our original identity is our belovedness.

## THE FALSE SELF

After his baptism in the river Jordan Jesus spent some time on his own in the desert. In that barren and silent landscape, he became aware of three major temptations in his heart. A voice within invited him to build his life around possessions, power and

prestige. The possibility of a life fed by accumulation, achievement and the approval of others was dangled before him and offered as a programme for happiness. Jesus who a short time previously had claimed his belovedness was now tempted instead to define himself by what he had, by what he did and by what other people thought of him. It was indeed an attractive offer. But Jesus said, ‘No! I am not what I have, I am not what I do and I am not what other people think of me. I am Abba’s Beloved Son and I am loved unconditionally.’ Jesus chose to reject a superficial agenda for happiness. Now he was ready to practice and preach Abba’s universal and inclusive love.

#### THE WOUND OF CONDITIONAL LOVE

What in fact Jesus said ‘no’ to in the desert was a lifestyle that promises much but fails to deliver leaving us dissatisfied and disappointed. It is a lifestyle that most people tend to sign up to. *Why?* Because we are under the control of what we call the false self. The false self is created by the wound of conditional love. At some stage in our formative years most of us begin to feel that love is something we need to earn. This is a source of deep emotional pain that we cannot process at a young age. It wounds us and prevents us from remaining true to ourselves. As a consequence, *two* things happen. Our *true* self goes into hiding to protect itself and *another* self develops around the demands and expectations of the significant adults in our lives. This other self is an acquired self, an idealised self, a false self. Because of our false self we need to own something, do something or be something to feel worthy of love. Our false self has us invest, often heavily, in what we can call the *three A’s*: accumulation, achievement and approval. Our false self is the reason we tend to define ourselves by what we have, by what we do and by what other people think of us. Sadly, the culture we are living in today reinforces this definition of ourselves. It promotes accumulation, achievement and the need for human approval. It openly and often shamelessly makes us believe that possessions, power and prestige will make us happy and fulfilled. The truth is they cannot make us happy because they are external sources of value. They have us look for happiness in the wrong places, in things outside ourselves.

#### THREE ADDICTIONS

At some point in our lives, we have to recognise and acknowledge that our false self is having a major influence on the way we are living. This will mean accepting that we may be accumulating

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much more than we need. Not giving in to consumerism is good for us, for the poor and indeed for our environment. It allows us to start filling the empty hole we feel inside with love rather than possessions. It provides the poor with that little bit extra to live on. And it is an expression of our care for the earth, our common home, that is being exploited to an alarming degree.

Letting go of our false self may also mean accepting that we are driven by a need to be useful and productive. Achievement has us find our worth in what we do and can lead to busyness and over work. Of course, it is good for us to achieve, but if we are too emotionally invested in our work, achievement becomes more important than relationships. To repeat what I said earlier, we are called human beings, not human doers.

Finally, letting go of the false self may mean owning up to our constant need for the approval of other people. Pleasing others doesn't necessarily mean that they will accept us. Keeping up with the Joneses is no guarantee that our neighbours will respect us. Putting posts on Facebook doesn't provide assurance that our followers will like us. The ways we use to get the approval of others are many. In truth they do not work. What's more, they give other people too much power and control over us. Defining ourselves by what other people think of us only leads to disappointment.

## WITHIN

Jesus once said, "Anyone who wants to save his life must lose it. Anyone who loses his life will find it" (Matt 16:25). Many people find these words difficult to understand and accept. They feel they are too harsh, even a denial of life. What Jesus is in fact referring to here is the false and true self. He is pointing out that unless we let go of the control the false self has over us, we will not discover who we really are. In other words, we need to stop finding our value in things outside ourselves and instead find our value *within*. Jesus knew from experience that happiness is indeed an inside job. He was clear that the treasure is found in our hearts. Of course, letting go of the false self is not easy. It has been operating in us from childhood and it will do anything to stay centre stage. For many it takes a crisis before the process can begin. Whether or not we need a crisis to help us let go of the false self, it is certain that we need 'something more powerful' to replace it. This 'something more powerful' is the voice of Abba God affirming us, telling us that we are his beloved daughters and sons and that he is very pleased with us. We cannot let go of the false self unless we experience the true self.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that in order to practice and preach the Gospel Jesus needed to claim his belovedness and say ‘no’ to the demons of the false self. If we have any hope of practising and preaching the Gospel in our contemporary culture, we surely need to do the same. I am convinced that to follow Jesus *two* things are necessary. We need to claim our belovedness and tame our false self.

**Ignatius and the Our Father.** In the second method of prayer, Ignatius recommends praying the Our Father a word at a time, staying with each word as long as it continues to echo inside. The person is to avoid the impulse to rush ahead. Ignatius expresses it this way: ‘If in contemplating the Our Father one finds in one or two words rich matter for reflection and much relish and consolation, there should be no anxiety to go further, even though the whole hour is spent on what has been found’ (*Spiritual Exercises*, 254).

– THOMAS G. CASEY, *The Mindful Our Father*, Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2022, p. 17.