

The Tyranny of Me, Me, Me¹

This sermon has been brewing for at least three years. Three years ago, I began to notice that celebrities—people like Madonna, Michael Jackson, Britney Spears, and so on---were very powerful, not in singing and dancing, but at getting attention. Something is way out of joint when Paris Hilton is getting round the clock media coverage as she sits in jail for driving on a suspended license, while all the while a famine is sweeping through the horn of Africa. So, item one—celebrity self-promotion

Item two is Americans living like royalty on debt. When the economic crisis hit it was vividly clear how many Americans had borrowed their way into lifestyles of the rich and famous. Everybody's got to live in a mansion. Somewhere along the way, a sizeable portion of our citizenry has come to assume that they deserve nothing but the best which is had on the cheap at 18% approved credit rating.

Item three is that everybody's famous. There have been technological developments on the internet mostly that have enabled a whole new level of self-display. Take YouTube. YouTube is an internet site where literally millions of homemade video clips are collected. Suddenly, every living room dancer, aspiring singer, bedroom guitarist, and religious lecturer, can

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video and post themselves and their antics for--no kidding--all the world to see. Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that everyone who is on YouTube is a nut. But, trust me, every nut is on YouTube.

Now, add to these seemingly unrelated developments other curiosities. There's grade inflation. To give a student what used to be a "gentleman's C" is an insult to a student and his or her parents. Did you know that for the last several years the average grade point average for college students has risen while standardized test results have fallen. What's that child's learning game? Baby Einstein. Everybody's Einstein.

Then there are the mega-dollar bonuses for corporate leaders. There's cosmetic surgery. Everybody's a supermodel. On and on. America has become the land of celebrity without talent, life like royalty on borrowed money, hot good looks via cosmetic surgery, and a nation of above average children. Everybody is a big deal.

Now this may sound like griping or jealousy. This may sound like a random laundry list of grievances about a the direction of our society. But I don't believe that it's a laundry list. What's beginning to dawn on me is that there's a common factor tying all these and several other factors together. What is it? It's the exaltation of me! The opposite

of modesty appears to be overtaking the country. Increasingly, realistic spending and attention are giving way to excessive self-display.

A fine example of what I'm talking about was the Balloon Boy hoax last October. You'll recall that a Colorado couple garnered world attention, snarled emergency services, and closed down Denver's Airport when they claimed that their six-year-old son, ostentatiously named Falcon, had been carried aloft in a homemade flying saucer balloon. The stunt garnered world attention and cost emergency services tens of thousands of dollars. Of course, the child had been told to hide in an attic and was never really in danger. All of this meant that the stunt was to draw attention to the family so that they might become the subject of a reality T.V. show. Actually, the family had had a history of self-promoting behavior.

Someone says that hoaxes are as old as time, and you're correct. What I'm worried about is that immodest, selfish, self-promoting, entitlement behavior is demonstrably advancing in dozens of ways. It's as if we're terrified of living average lives with normal pleasures. Out of that terror we'll do anything to stand out.

What I'm describing social scientists call narcissism. Do you remember the old mythological character, Narcissus? He was

a handsome young man who was exceptionally cruel to those who cared about him. In the end of his story he fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water and perished gazing at himself. He died because he could love nothing but himself.

What does our faith say about our narcissism epidemic? Actually, our faith speaks clearly about excessive self-focus. Jesus, for example, really was a superstar as he lived in heaven with the father and spirit. But Jesus laid aside all the trappings of divinity, the power, glory, the big house and the bling and became a normal human being. Jesus didn't even become a king or priest or scholar or celebrity. He was just a person. In fact, Jesus did nothing to advance his social status. Jesus didn't expend energy promoting himself

Later in Jesus' career he confronted the temptation to be important. Remember how the Devil tempted him to miraculously feed himself, and then to become the ruler of the world, or to throw himself off the Tower so that angels would rescue him. All of these temptations were forms of attraction to rise above normal human life. But Jesus refused to live above the common human level. The average guy couldn't snap his fingers and make bread appear. Jesus refused to live above the level of the average guy.

Our faith teaches us also that we are made in God's image. The kid from the affluent Atlanta family whose daddy spends \$75,000 on her sweet sixteen party complete with car and fake paparazzi doesn't really need that extravagance to be special. She's already special because she is fashioned after the pattern of the Creator of the Universe. And this tends to get lost, so are her friends. You see, her importance or worth are not secured because her car is way cooler than Nikki's. Her importance is baked right into her essence as a child of God.

Here's why I think that the Narcissism epidemic is a big deal. Unregulated self-absorption and self-centeredness numbs us to the reality of other persons. In our effort to rise above them, we loose touch with their beauty and worth.

Christian faith presumes that we have the capacity for humility. The word is like humus being from the earth or ground. Humility's great benefit is that it is truth, realism, it is the virtue with its feet on the ground.

There's an informal, even cute description of difficult people that you've probably heard—high maintenance personalities. There's no formal description of a high maintenance person. Generally, high maintenance is a narcissistic person who is forever demanding that a disproportionate amount of time, attention, and resources be

devoted to them. This person's feelings frequently need to be soothed. He or she needs to be consulted, respected, pampered, appreciated, and supported. Whatever pool of emotional support is available in a home, team or office the high maintenance person demands 90% of it. And they're not thinking of the others.

What is lost in our era of me, me, me, is the joy of humility. Humility is a prime Christian virtue that recognizes that life itself, our own being, and the persons around us are irreducibly precious because they're gifts of God. Humility orients life around this truth—others exist who are just as important than me. God exists. And there are truths, and causes beyond me that are worth my utmost and best. Narcissism—the idea that we must rise above others or be worthless is simply a lie.

Let's not get swept away in the cult of self that is so prevalent in our generation. It is a powerful insight to notice that Jesus—the one who lived the ideal human life—was a son, a child, of the Father. We're not called to be God, or little gods, but children of God. You and I don't need to run the Universe or act as if we're important enough to do so. We have a God to do all that. Our great joy is to live as his creatures out of his provision. It is in our place as children of God

that rich joyous human living is found. And those around us, by
the way, will be glad that we found it.