

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Mar 3rd 2015

I remember when I defended my thesis. My family came and hung outside the conference room while my thesis committee grilled me on the finer points of evolutionary biology and parasites. After a successful defense, I invited everyone to my apartment to celebrate. As everyone congratulated me, they made sure to greet me as Doctor Shea or Doctor John. Oddly, I didn't feel like a "doctor." I felt no more intelligent than I did before my thesis defense. If anything, I felt less intelligent! And I felt like the same dumb schmuck the following morning. Later, standing before a classroom of students, I felt like a fraud – like I didn't deserve the title, "Doctor."

After being ordained a priest and working in a parish, that same feeling of being a phony returned. When an elderly man of the parish greeted me, I thought to myself, "How can you call me 'Father,' when you're so much older and wiser than me?" I felt both inadequate and incompetent.

Such feelings are common among new parents, doctors, priests, officers and anyone with a fancy-sounding title. Social psychologists have studied the "imposter phenomenon" since the 1970's. Unfortunately, some people deal with these feelings in an unhelpful way. Feeling insecure about their new identity, they overcompensate. They throw themselves into their work trying to out-perform everyone else with the hope that no one will see them as the fraud they see themselves as. Or to avoid the risk of "losing" they avoid work altogether. Instead, they focus their attention on superficial matters, spending hours in front of a mirror to look the part, insisting that everyone references them with their proper title and rigidly enforcing rules that does little to help others.

So maybe I feel some sympathy for the Pharisees who imagine waking up one morning in shocked realization, "Wait, I'm a Pharisee?!" And many of these Pharisees felt insecure with this new identity. So they compensated by majoring in the minors, making others feel miserable. Yet Isaiah reminds us that, as the people of God, we are all called to alleviate suffering, promote justice, right wrongs and defend the weak. Those with important sounding titles are just as responsible, if not more, for doing the good.

This is why Jesus, with typical hyperbole, tells us to drop our honorifics and titles. Forget about being called rabbi, father or master. Such titles elevate us, fill our egos, pre-occupy us and get in the way of our calling to serve God and others. If Katharine Drexel allowed her status as the daughter of a wealthy banker to get in the way of her calling, then she probably would never have joined the Sisters of Mercy, helped establish the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament or endured the racial prejudices entailed in ministering to African and Native Americans.

So forget your titles. Humble yourself and drop your ill-conceived perception of yourself. Only with true humility can we see ourselves as we truly are – beloved children of God. Our love for others flows from this primary identity. Only when we first recognize this, are we free to love others as mothers, fathers, sisters, doctors and teachers.

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