

Pentecost XVI “*Getting Connected Through Your Personality*” September 16, 2007

Our focus today is on personality. Everyone has one, and everyone’s personality is unique and different, even though there are some common characteristics that tend to group personality types together. An excellent example that many of you have encountered, is the Myers/Briggs psychological profile, which is often used by psychologists and counselors to help understand and work with people. In Myers/Briggs, people are divided into contrasting groups such as . . .

- Extroverts or Introverts
- Thinkers or Feelers
- Intuitives or Sensors
- Judgers or Perceivers

But whatever your personality characteristics are, the bottom line is that God has given each of us a unique personality for one single purpose . . . and that is God’s glory! We all have spiritual gifts. We all have our passions and interests. We all have our natural abilities. And we all have our unique personalities. But these are all gifts from God, and these are all part of God’s purposes and fundamentally, they are designed to give God glory!

Another way to try to understand your personality and the diversity of personalities that exists in the church today, is to consider some very simple concepts:

- How you relate to others, and
- How you respond to opportunities

The reality is that your personality characteristics influence your entire life . . .

- from decision-making to dealing with change,
- from solving problems to resolving conflict,
- from engaging people to dealing with feelings,
- from competing with others to cooperating with people.

Have you ever had this thought . . . **If more people were like me, wouldn’t it be a much better and easier world to live in!**

Nobody would ever admit to that secret desire, but we’ve all felt it or acted on it or had that unspoken desire when people don’t seem to live up to our expectations.

The problem with that thought is that this is not the way God created the world. A quick look around, and we should all see immediately that God loves variety, even if we don’t! God didn’t create people to please you, and God didn’t create you to please other people. God created us to please God! That is very important to understand as we begin!

God created us to relate differently, to feel differently, to react differently and to respond to life differently. God gave you and I a unique personality, and God did it **intentionally** as part of creating His masterpiece!

So our challenge is to try to understand this personality, that God has given to us, and then to use it for God's glory and for God's purposes.

How many times have we become frustrated with a co-worker, a partner, a family member or a friend, a parent or a child! And we blame them for being the way they are! The truth is that we can usually trace our own frustrations, and if we are honest with ourselves . . . we come back to our own personality. You see . . . we all deal and relate to people differently.

Unfortunately, most of us want the other person to change. We say things to ourselves:

- If they were just different,
- If they would just act they way they are supposed to act, we'd get along so much better.

The problem with that kind of thinking is that we are not addressing the fact that we may be the problem ourselves, and not the other person!

The truth is that none of us has the power to change personalities of other people. People are what they are. The only person we can change is us! We can change the way we react and relate to various people and their personalities. That means we can change our response. In our interactions, we are the ones who can adjust and deal with others, not the other way around!

Our 2nd Lesson for today, I Timothy 1:12-17, gives us some practical insights on this issue. The apostle Paul is the writer, and the contrast has to do with what he was **before** his conversion what he was **after** his conversion.

“Even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence . . . but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” (I Timothy 1:13-14)

On the one hand we can say that Paul was changed after his conversion experience and yet, we can also see that Paul still essentially had the same personality before and after the conversion. Before his conversion experience, he was still a leader, an extrovert, outgoing, intense, passionate, articulate, and focused. But after his conversion, Paul had the same personality, but he was focused on God, in a totally different way. And the difference in focus was so life-changing, that we know he literally changed his name . . . from Saul to Paul!

When you look more deeply into Paul's biography, and as you study his letters and read about his experiences in the book of Acts, the first thing you begin to see was that Paul was passionate for God both **before and after his conversion experience**.

However . . . before his conversion, his personality led him to violence, persecution and a sense of self-righteousness and judging others who opposed his views. However, after his conversion, his personality led him to completely different attributes . . . tolerance, love and grace.

Paul was still an extrovert. Paul was still passionate about his faith. Paul was still a tireless worker for God, a prolific writer and disciple of the Lord. But instead of violence and persecution, his focus was now on the power and impact of God's unconditional love and his experience of the depth of God's grace!

In Paul's case, he was *doing the wrong things for the seemingly right reasons!* And as we think about Paul as an example, we may have a hard time relating to his own words of overt, negative and aggressive power. But the reality is, that such things as blasphemy, persecution and violence can also come wrapped in a variety of packages. And for each one of us, as we look at our own lives . . . it may not be what we have actually done, but what we have left undone that exposes our own violent nature.

But as we think of Paul as an example, the important thing to understand is that God can use our whole self, our whole personality, our whole life, in order to serve Him. And God wants us to use our unique personalities in ways that will glorify Him!

- Whether we are outgoing or reserved
- Self-expressive or self-controlled,
- Cooperative or competitive,
- High risk or low risk,
- People-oriented or project-oriented . . .

Whatever our basic personality is, God wants to use each one of us for His greater purposes! And we desperately need to be connected to God for this reason. Because if we are disconnected from the one who is love, from the one who is light, from the one who makes all things whole . . . then we can never be the person and personality that God intended for us to be!

Some of you might remember the movie, *Good Will Hunting*, starring Robin Williams and Matt Damon. It won 2 academy awards and it was the story of a brilliant young man (played by Matt Damon) who tries to lift himself out of the South Boston Irish ghetto, where he and his friends are trapped. He had been abused as a child, and Will had never been in a loving relationship. He discovers a special woman, who has the potential to become the love of his life, but he subverts the relationship and drives her away. And because Will never learned how to be loved, he could not receive the real love when it came his way. The bottom line in his emotional life was that he did not know how to love and he did not know how to receive love.

A number of years ago a Jesuit priest by the name of John Powell wrote a book entitled, *Why Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am?* The book has sold millions of copies and I have one in my library. I have referred to it often. John Powell's simple thesis is that people hide who they really are, from others, because of one basic fear. He describes this basic fear in an actual conversation he had with someone.

Powell: *"I am writing a booklet, to be called, Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am."*

Other: *"Do you want an answer to your question?"*

Powell: *"That is the purpose of the booklet, to answer the question."*

Other: *"But do you want **my** answer?"*

Powell: *"Yes, of course I do."*

Other: *"I am afraid to tell you who I am, because, if I tell you who I am, you may not like who I am, and it's all that I have."*

The fear John Powell speaks of . . .that people would not like us if they really knew who we are . . .does have a basis in reality. It is true, as the Bible points out, that none of us measures up fully to God's intention and design for our lives. Unfortunately, we do, in fact, subvert our own best intentions. Then that secret inner voice begins to talk to us and accuse us, and those inner accusations gain strength and we hide even more.

So we develop ways to cope with this situation and we develop a "persona" or way of presenting ourselves to the world. The "me" you see is not one hundred percent the "me" I know.

Some persons have a **critical persona** which is critical of everyone and everything. That protects them from their own inner person, which they are secretly and persistently critical of. When you're very critical of others, it's usually a sign of trying to get the pressure off of yourself. Focus on their problems and you don't have to focus on yours!

Others have a **savior persona** which wants to save and take care of everyone and everything. But the savior persona is meant to protect the inner person from people thinking badly of us. How could anyone not like someone who is always helping others or trying to save the day?

One of the more difficult personas is the **negative persona**. The negative persona sees everyone and everything in such negative terms that the inner person feels more at home. It's not so bad that I am so bad if everyone else is so bad! Therapy can help, but only God's love and grace can heal.

Because God knows you for who you really are and loves you regardless of who you are, you can break free of those personas and from the attitudes and expectations of others. If the Lord God of this universe knows you, and still loves you and redeems you, what is there left to fear?

Kathleen Chesto wrote to *Catholic Digest* to tell them about an incident that occurred in her family. Her five-year-old child approached her one day in the kitchen and asked, "*Mom, is God a grown-up or a parent?*"

Mom was a little puzzled by the question: "*I'm not sure what you mean, is there a difference between a grown-up and a parent?*"

"Yep . . . grown-ups love you when you are good, but parents love you anyway."

Do we truly understand the awesome impact of God's unconditional love! On a personal level, will you allow God to love you unconditionally, as a person, as a unique personality! For Paul, his experience of God's unconditional love was so overwhelming, that he spent his entire ministry, sharing that marvelous gift with everyone he encountered . . . his new churches, his new converts, and people all over the known world!