

“Selfies”
Genesis 1:26-31 and Acts 5:12-16
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First United Methodist Church, Baraboo
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A selfie is a picture taken of oneself by oneself using a digital camera, especially for posting on social networks. This selfie taken on December 10, 2013 at the memorial service for Nelson Mandela in Johannesburg, South Africa. This selfie quickly went viral. It shows Prime Minister of Denmark Helle Thorning-Schmidt, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom David Cameron and President Barack Obama taking a selfie. Michelle Obama did not approve. I imagine she was thinking “How self-absorbed and childish can you be, Barack! I don’t want anything to do with you right now!” But was the president really behaving so badly?

Chris Taylor, on the web site “Mashable”, says it wasn’t as bad as it looked. This wasn’t a funeral in a church but a four hour celebration of Nelson Mandela’s life in a soccer stadium. Other famous people were having their pictures taken too. Here’s former president George W. Bush with the rock star Bono. The U.S. president and prime ministers of Denmark and the U.K. weren’t the only ones having fun. Here’s some other attendees at the Memorial service. Don’t they look like they are having a great time celebrating the life of this incredible man, Nelson Mandela?

Selfies seem self-centered. I have a hunch there’s something more to selfies than selfishness though. Selfies are digital self-portraits. And many artists have painted self-portraits (Rembrandt did about ninety in his lifetime.) The impulse behind a selfie is partly see who we really are. The urge to take a selfie may come from the same impulse that prompted Augustine to write his Confessions. Augustine was concerned with himself because it is *as a self* that we respond to God’s call. Answering the question “who am I?” then helps us know what God is calling us to do.

If Jesus were here today, I think he would take a selfie because Jesus met people where they are. More and more of us are spending more and more time on line, with smartphones. Social media is how we connect with each other. Selfies usually don’t stay on people’s phones. Selfies are meant to be shared. We take a selfie and hit “share” and our selfies go out to all our family and friends.

Sharing was the theme of our scriptures today. Genesis 1:27 says God created human beings and shared God’s likeness with both male and female. “God created humanity in God’s own image, in the divine image God created them,^[a] male and female God created them.” (Genesis 1:26) In other ancient cultures the king alone bore God’s image. Here all people are a mirror of God for the world. God is creative, so we too are meant to be creative. “God blessed them and said to them, “Be fertile and

multiply..... “ God chooses to not be the only one with power. God is the great delegator of power. “Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground” God tells the humans. So it’s our taks to bring the world to the fullest possible potential. So, who are we? We are the ones with whom God shares God’s image and God’s power.

The reading from Acts is also about sharing power. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended on those gathered in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. The Holy spirit that was in Jesus Christ, the risen one, is now shared throughout the church. “Signs and wonders” appear. The apostles Peter and John are interpret scripture, proclaim the good news and heal like Jesus did. The Jews of Jerusalem wonder “Who are these people?” They must be gods! “As a result, they would even bring the sick out into the main streets and lay them on cots and mats so that at least Peter’s shadow could fall on some of them as he passed by.” (Acts 5:15)

In both the readings from Genesis and Acts, God is a power broker. In creation God shared the divine image with the man and the woman. At Pentecost the risen Christ shared his spirit with the church. Colossians 1:15 calls Jesus “ the image of the invisible God, the one who is first over all creation.”^l If God is Father/Son/Holy Spirit – and if Jesus is the image of the invisible God,^a Jesus was a kind of self- portrait of God. You could say that Jesus was God’s selfie. At Pentecost Jesus was taking a selfie of his own. In the church now disciple would do what Jesus had done before: teach, preach, interpret the scripture, heal. The disciples would now reflect Jesus to the world.

Nadia Bolz-Weber is the founding pastor of the House for all Sinners and Saints, in Denver. Once Nadia Bolz-Weber was asked to summarize the gospel in seven words. Here’s what she said: “We are who God says we are.” We are the ones who are meant to share in God’s image and God’s power. God shares. Like selfies are taken mostly to be shared. We take selfies and send them to family and friends, and they connect us to people we care about. Like taking selfies can be a way to connect us with the mystery of who we are and what God is calling us to do. To see how this works in our lives, I want to tell you about what a professor at San Diego State University is learning about the impact of social media on iGen – the folks born between 1995 and 2012. Prof. Twenge studies social media use among teens. Since 2006 teens on-line use has doubled. Between 2011-2012 the number of youth with smartphone exceeded 50%. 2011-12 was also a pivotal year for the start of some disturbing trends, such as a higher number of major depressive episodes among teens; more self harm; declining levels of happiness; lower self-esteem and higher suicide rates. During this time, the number of times youth reporting going out with friends went down, as did the number of teens going to parties. There was more sleep deprivation. Prof. Twenge has not proved a causal link between smart phone use and these negative in mental health. Yet she found these parallel trends noteworthy.

In her research she also asked “what’s different about the teens who are bucking these trends? What are teens who are happy actually doing?” Here’s what she found: the teens who reported being happier tended to use more print media than their peers; they get more sleep; they are more likely to be working at a paying job; they had more person to person interactions; they are likely to be involved in sports (which involves spending time with peers); they are more likely to attend religious services. In other words they were sharing their time with others.

So, what does all this have to do with us? Does this research about happier teens apply to all of us? As I think about Professor Twenge’s snapshot of happier teens alongside the scriptures today from Genesis and Acts, I feel there’s a connection. It has to do with sharing. In today’s scriptures people who are thriving, doing amazing things in this world, are aware of how much they have to share. They share God’s image, God’s resurrection power. For them, power is not necessarily a bad, egotistical or abusive thing. They see their power as a potential source of blessing. I hear Prof. Twenge’s description of happier teens as a description of us; people who are comfortable sharing with others; sharing time, sharing face to face interactions; looking at each other in the eye. Throughout our lives, we will continue to enter deeper into the mystery of who we are. As we do, we discover more about who God is too. And we will, I hope, never stop asking “what is God calling me to do?” We are the ones with whom God shares God’s very self: we have the divine imprinted on each of us. Jesus shares his Spirit with us as disciples in the world today. Through face to face encounters, we reflect God to each other, God is glorified and we thrive.

I want to end with this photo. It’s not a selfie. It is a picture of people sharing time together. It’s our youth group sharing time together this week. They are wearing orange as part of an effort by NBC15 News and Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin. By wearing orange and posting this picture on the NBC15 Face Book page, 28 meals were donated to the cause of fighting hunger. This picture was shared on our church’s Face Book page. We are the ones who reveal God to each other through the power of the Holy Spirit that we’ve been given. “We are who God says we are.” What makes for good mental health makes us come more alive spiritually too. That is very good news indeed. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.