

I come in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Woulda, Shoulda, Coulda! If I woulda gone to college, I shoulda gotten a better job, and coulda saved more money. If I woulda hung out with the right people, I shoulda been able to stay out of trouble, and coulda avoided incarceration. If I woulda listened to my heart, I shoulda pursued my passions, and coulda enjoyed my life's work.

Have you ever looked back and wondered how your life would have turned out if you would have made different choices? Did you ever wonder what you were thinking when you acted a certain way, made an impulsive decision, or suddenly changed directions in your life? Do you ever feel regret over these things? Do you ever wish you could take a 'Mulligan,' a do-over, hoping things would turn out differently (for the better)? Sometimes, I think we live our lives in regret. We look back at our lives and cringe at our own actions, attitudes, and decisions. We don't take time to get to know ourselves. If we don't know ourselves, we cannot learn who God created us to be.

Perhaps the regret that we feel is rooted in acknowledging that the life we have lived so far, or are living today, is not in harmony with who God created us to be. How many decisions do we make in order to change ourselves into someone we are not? For example, how many introverts make career choices that require

them to be extroverts? Getting up every morning to go to work becomes an exhausting exercise, increases stress, and may contribute to emotional issues. Or how about promoting a strong and resourceful employee who dislikes supervisory duties to a position of Regional Manager – a people management job? Here, too, the employee is set up to fail. How many people who are not wired to enjoy academics go to college because it's what everyone is expected to do – and performs poorly or graduates with emotional issues? Granted, life's circumstances may require us to change our actions and make difficult decisions. Even in difficult times, we can be true to ourselves and to God.

What it comes down to is that we are not always brutally honest with ourselves. We try to become someone who we are not. We spend our lives, day after day, trying to become someone we are not in order to meet the expectations of the world. We try to conform to who others expect us to be, and not who God **created** us to be. And sometimes, when we try to be who God created us to be, we are not accepted in our family, workplace, or community. We don't measure up in their sight, we disappoint them, are an embarrassment, and even alienated. Consider academically astute individuals who become artists. Or those who give up high-level management positions to establish day camps for the poor. These people are among us.

Our readings today encourage us to be true to ourselves and God. God made us in His image. Each of us has been created with purpose and on purpose. We are created in profound and immeasurable love. Recall, Jeremiah wrote:

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,

and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Do not be afraid of them,  
for I am with you to deliver you,

says the Lord."

I knew you before you were born, and I consecrated you. I am with you to deliver you. How powerful is that? We know that God created us in love, and all that God creates is good. Having faith gives us hope.

Everything beyond who God created us to be, we tack on, and pack on, ourselves. All of those things that we tack on and pack on are those things that others use to judge us in this life. Our education, occupation, marital status, world views, wealth, power, and appearance are the measuring sticks that society uses to judge our goodness and success.

But Jeremiah reminds us that we do not need to be afraid of being measured up by the world. God formed you to be who He wants you to be, and promises to be with

you always. In our Gospel from Luke, the story from last week continues. Last week, Jesus told the people in the synagogue that the scripture passage from Isaiah had been fulfilled in this reading.

The men in the synagogue pointed out that Jesus was the son of a craftsman. They judged him based on the assumptions, biases, and stereotypes of their society. He's only the son of a common laborer. What authority did he have to make such claims? How dare he? Then Jesus pointed out that prophets are never accepted in their own towns, and cited how Elijah and Elisha were only accepted by Gentiles, not Jews. Of course, this enraged them, and they were going to kill Jesus. But, Jesus was true to himself. He embraced being who he was and did not waver. God delivered him, and he walked away.

Jesus did not hang status, power, wealth, ambitions, or expectations on himself. He simply lived in truth, trusted in God's will, and loved.

What Paul tells us today in his letter to the Corinthians, is that love is cannot be held down by the weight of social expectations. As a matter of fact, love outweighs these expectations. In a hurried world, love is patient. In a mean-spirited world, love is kind. In an irritable world, love is tolerant. In a prideful world, love is humble. Love is not bound by any of the worldly measuring sticks. All of those things that we tack on and pack on have no value when it comes to love. The only thing that matters is our love.

So what? Someday you will transition from this life into the next. You will leave your wealth and status behind. They have no purpose in eternal life. Your education, power, occupation, and appearance will simply evaporate into nothingness.

Even your faith will be left behind. After all, you will no longer need faith, because you will see first-hand the glory and magnificence of our Creator. Your hope will also no longer be needed, because your hope will be fulfilled in the profound forgiveness, mercy, and love of God. The only remaining part of you to enter eternal life is your love. Everything else will be left behind.

If love is all we will have left for eternity, would it not be in your best interest to do all you can to grow, nurture, and live in love? After all, your time here is brief. Why waste it on trivial things like power, wealth, status, and appearance? These will all pass away. Would it not be better to spend your time in faith, hope, joy, kindness, patience, humility, tolerance, compassion, and love?

May you free yourself from the regrets of woulda, shoulda, coulda, and live in harmony with your true self. May you have the confidence that God will deliver you from all that threatens your true identity in Him. May you share your gifts of kindness, patience, humility, tolerance, compassion and love with all. May you live with, and love, yourself, the self who God created you to be. Amen.