

Four years before his death, Thomas Merton noted in his journal, *The time has probably come to go back on all that I have said about one's "real self," or "true self." The time has come to show that there is after all no hidden mysterious "real self" other than or "hiding behind" the self that one is.*

*The "real self" is not an object, but I have betrayed it by seeming to promise a possibility of knowing it somewhere, sometimes as a reward for astuteness, fidelity, and a quick-witted ability to stay one jump ahead of reality. However, the empirical self is not to be taken as fully "real." Here is where the illusions begin.*

All the admonitions to know yourself, to be true to yourself, from Socrates to Oprah, assume a real or true self to discover, if we only look hard enough. Jeremiah has his own take on the subject: *The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?*

In Jeremiah's vocabulary the word "heart" does not refer to the metaphorical heart of Valentine's Day cards, but to the whole person, the "real self." Jeremiah thinks it is next to impossible for us to know our real or true selves.

In a film ("The Stalker") directed by Andrei Tarkovsky, a stalker is a professional guide, a man who undertakes to go into the 'zone' and take other people into it. The 'zone' is a place, a huge area, which is the trace left by an extraterrestrial civilization.

It is a dangerous place: many people do not come back from it, people perish there. And yet the stream of those wishing to go never ceases, and the reason is that in the center of the 'zone' is a secret room in which the most intimate human desires are fulfilled.

The desire fulfilled, however, is not the one you have in *mind*, but the one that is in your *heart*—the most cherished, the most secret and desired, the one you do not always acknowledge to yourself.

The stalker remembers a story: once, one of the most experienced stalkers made it into the secret room and began to plead that his dead brother be brought back to life. He prayed. But when he came out again, it turned out that his brother remained dead. The stalker, however, became immensely rich, his secret desire fulfilled.

Jeremiah could have directed this film. Walter Brueggemann describes Jeremiah as a poet of immense imagination and a man of deep courage and faith. He is rooted in the life and perspective of a village, Anathoth. Villages populated by peasants served basically to provide tax money to support the central establishment and produce agricultural goods to enhance the royal economy.

Jeremiah was nurtured in a perspective highly suspicious of the political, economic, and theological pretensions of the urban establishment. He was a product and representative of a theology grounded in a very old and very deep hostility to the Davidic establishment's pursuit of economic and military power. Jeremiah bears abiding testimony against the self-destructive policies of the royal temple urban elite.

Jeremiah receives protection from the family of Shaphan, a powerful presence in the small political economy of Jerusalem. This family saved Jeremiah from execution by the state. The fact that he had such powerful political allies and protectors suggests that he was not a lone voice in Jerusalem.

The support of Jeremiah by Shaphan, in opposition to the king, was given at great risk to both prophet and protector. Jeremiah and his supporters concluded the royal temple establishment was practicing policies of death and destruction. Jeremiah sees clearly and says unmistakably that the city is in a life-or-death moment.

Jeremiah's charge 17:5-10 echoes Psalm 1 and informs Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. Those who live as though they were autonomous are cursed and those who trust in God are blessed. *I am the Lord who probes the heart, testing the conscience and allowing (not give) to a man according to his ways according to the fruit of his deed* (Alter's translation).

The crooked human heart is a manifestation of a pathological condition. No one can fathom the deviousness of his/her own heart. God, and God alone, can enter the 'zone' to reveal the condition of our hearts, the state of our true selves.

Our best hope of seeing the condition of our hearts lies in our relationships with our neighbors, especially our neighbors who are poor, who are hungry, who are grieving, who are persecuted for pursuing justice.

In pronouncing blessing upon the poor Jesus stands in the tradition of Jeremiah in opposition to all the forces of death operating in the political economy of the day. Luke understands the word "poor" concretely. Jesus himself knew neither riches or recognition his whole life through, and from his birth had no part of the cultural and economic prosperity of the upper class.

According to David Bentley Hart, ". . .the entire way of life that was at one time the very essence of Christian existence, with its contempt for wealth and its hostility to the mechanisms of power by which societies and nations and empires thrive and survive and perpetuate themselves, is the very way of life to which most Christian culture throughout the centuries has proved implacably hostile.

"It would be no exaggeration to say that, viewed entirely in historical perspective, cultural and institutional 'Christianity' has, for most of its history, consisted in the systematic negation of the Christianity of Christ, the apostles, and the earliest church."

Neediness taught Jesus and the early Christians to discover other riches, and to look to the unseen. In the situation that unjustly befell them, they found a hint of the kingdom of God already *in community*.

The beatitudes do not address a singular “you” but the entirety of the community (plural “you”). It is almost impossible for us with our militant individualism, with our hearts curved in upon themselves, to hear this. Jesus pronounces blessing, not on Tom, Martha, Hasan or Nadia, however impoverished.

We do not, cannot know our own hearts, our true selves, apart from relationship with the least of these, Jesus’ brothers and sisters. We know the blessing of Jesus as we learn to see ourselves in the faces of the poor, the hungry, the grieving, the suffering, as we enter into fellowship with them, become one with them.