

The Second Baptist Pulpit

“Removing the Mask”
Matthew 23:1-12
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Since we didn't have our Halloween Carnival at church this year on Halloween night, I have to say it was fun to be home for the trick-or-treating. I enjoy Halloween. It's one of the few times in the year when most neighborhoods actually get out and interact with each other.

I went out with Ivy and the Garcias, and Heidi stayed back at the house to greet the trick-or-treaters. Ivy, Anika, and Aren got so much candy that by the end they were actually saying, *We don't need any more.*

I was thinking back on Halloween when I was a kid. My earliest memory of my own Halloween costume was those boxed costumes with the cellophane on the lid that you bought at the grocery store. It was always a plastic mask with an elastic band on the back and then a one piece outfit of whatever it was supposed to be.

My earliest memory is having one of those that was Caspar the Friendly Ghost. I still remember that white mask that looked

a lot like the Pillsbury Doughboy.

And then as I think about it, I can see a theme in my costumes as I got a little older. They involved a tan bathrobe.

I grew up at the height of Star Wars, so one year I was Luke Skywalker with the tan bathrobe and a light saber. Another year I got a pretty cool Yoda mask and again paired that with the tan bathrobe.

And then we had at our house this rubber mask of an old man's head. It was one of those that you pulled over your whole head. It makes me kind of short of breath just think about it now. But it was a very realistic looking old man. I can remember wearing that mask and, again, pairing it with the tan bathrobe. The "old man in his bathrobe" costume is always popular.

Dressing up, putting on masks, is fun. The problem comes when masquerading as someone you are not becomes the business of a lifetime rather than the fun of one evening.

[Deborah Fortel, "Masqueraders Anonymous," October 31, 1999, www.day1.net]

Jesus is giving that exact warning to all of us religious folk today. In particular, he is con-

fronting the religious leaders in our scripture with the accusation that they are not who they are pretending to be.

The Gospel for this day from the 23rd chapter of Matthew puts Jesus in the midst of a crowd where he dismisses the scribes and Pharisees as fakes—people dressed up in a costume, pretending to be something they are not.

He says, *The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy burdens hard to bear and lay them on the shoulders of others. But they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.*

They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long—they love to dress up to look like pious people. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people recognize their costume and call them rabbi.

And then Jesus concludes his little speech by saying this: *The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all*

who humble themselves will be exalted.

At one level, what Jesus is talking about is humility, being humble, not pretending to be more important than you really are.

All too many of those who opposed Jesus liked the place of honor, and if the polemics against them in the Gospels are even somewhat accurate, they were always jockeying for position. Jesus told them and us that we need to have a sense of proportion in our lives—that the love of God must be in us, giving us a sense of humility.

I read the story of a man who arrived in 1953 at the Chicago railroad station to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. He stepped off the train, a tall man with bushy hair and a big mustache. As the cameras flashed and city officials approached with hands outstretched to meet him, he thanked them politely. Then he asked to be excused for a minute.

He walked through the crowd to the side of an elderly black woman struggling with two large suitcases. He picked them up, smiled, and escorted her to the bus, helped her get on, and wished her a safe journey. Then Albert Schweitzer turned to the

crowd and apologized for keeping them waiting.

It is reported that one member of the reception committee told a reporter, *That's the first time I ever saw a sermon walking.*

[Roy T. Lloyd, "Charades and Reality," November 3, 2002, www.day1.net]

Humility. At one level that's what Jesus is talking about. And he's talking about treating everyone the same. Among the followers of Christ, there are to be no hierarchies of privilege. No one is granted a special status because of her wealth or title or education or because they can help us, which is the way we normally operate.

Jesus is offering an alternate way of living: we are to care for one another, to honor one another, and to respect one another; not because this will bring us some advantage, but simply because this is the way Christ calls us to live our lives.

Fred Craddock remembers working his way through college many years ago. One summer, he had a job in a box factory. He hammered nails to make crates for packaging vegetables.

He worked beside another man in a production line who did the

same work. The two handled the same crates, drove the same nails, did the same work and put in the same hours.

At the end of their first week, they both received their paychecks. They were proud of them, but when they looked at one another's checks Craddock noticed that his check was for fifteen dollars more than the other man's check.

He said to his co-worker, *Oops, looks like there has been a clerical mistake. Someone in the office probably did some bad typing. Let's go get it straightened out.*

So they went to the office and they said, *These checks aren't the same. We worked the same number of hours, so they ought to be identical.* Craddock said, *I believe he's been shorted.*

Well, there was some growling around and going into the back room, and then they finally came out with a new check for the other man that was the same amount as Craddock's. And before he left that day, Craddock said the boss pulled him aside and said, *We didn't know he could read.*

Treating people differently. He couldn't read, therefore he was to be taken advantage of.

Jesus offers another way: there is to be an equality of status among his followers. No one is deemed more important than another. We are to honor one another and to treat one another with the greatest respect.

And the things that so often divide people in our society are to have no bearing within the Body of Christ. Wealth, race, education, title, social status, none of these things are the basis for creating a hierarchy of privilege. Instead we are to become humble servants who nurture and support and care for each other.

At one level, Jesus' words here are about humility and treating one another the same without prejudice.

There is, though, I think, a deeper and more profound level to what Jesus is saying. It has to do with putting on masks and taking off masks.

See, I don't think Jesus has a problem with Halloween. The real problem, the profound problem, comes when masquerading as someone you are not becomes the business of a lifetime rather than the fun of one evening.

Here's what I think we really need to hear. In our Gospel today, Jesus Christ paints a pic-

ture of a barren religious life featuring all the outward signs but none of the inward reality. The religious leaders looked good, but the force of God's love wasn't underneath the mask.

The behavioral scientist Gordon Allport once spoke at Appleton Chapel at Harvard University about how a code of ethics, however highly approved, can be a hollow thing without something to back it up. Following the rules of faith—as if that was all that was required—was likened by Dr. Allport to living on the perfume of an empty vase.

It's possible to live, perhaps for a long time, on the perfume of an empty vase, but sooner or later one is thrust into a situation where there had better be some real flowers, not just the aroma, or you are lost.

Living on the aroma of an empty vase.

It's the tragedy of being religious without being the real deal, of placing primary emphasis on outer conduct or appearance rather than on inner presence. These people Jesus is confronting may talk a good game of faith, but when they are forced to fall back upon their inner resources of faith, they discover that the tank is empty.

[Roy T. Lloyd]

Jesus says, *Don't imitate them for they don't practice what they teach.* All perfume, no flowers. The aroma of an empty vase.

You can't live forever on the aroma of an empty vase. How tragic would it be to reach a point in your life when the outer appearance of faith is no longer enough and you need to reach inside and find something of substance, and you realize there's nothing there. All you find is the residue of real faith. A residual aroma.

I have a sense that that is something I have to watch out for. I write out some goals for myself every fall and share those with the Personnel Committee. Looking back, I noticed that almost every year one of my goals has been something like: Do a better job of nurturing my own spiritual life this year.

It's because I know what can happen and how easily it can happen. Jesus paints a picture of a barren religious life featuring all the outward signs but none of the inward reality. The aroma may still linger, but the flowers are gone.

What can happen with any of us is that when the religious mask is removed, there's nothing of

substance underneath. The problem with the mask is the mask conceals what is lacking underneath.

Why do we wear the masks?

How does masquerading become the business of lifetime for some of us?

Why were those Pharisees hiding behind those phylacteries and fringes, hiding behind the seats of honor?

How can you and I hide behind outer signs of faith while we let the inner faith dry up?

It's fear, isn't it? Like an animal who puffs himself up as a defense mechanism when he is afraid. We're afraid to let people see what's behind the mask. We're afraid they won't like us as much, afraid they won't think as highly of us, afraid we might be rejected, afraid they won't love us.

And, I think, deep down, we might even be afraid God would react the same way if he saw behind the mask.

A couple of years ago at Camp Second, our children's camp, for our worship time at night we used as a theme the idea of taking off our masks. Some of you who were there might remember the first night when we had you put a square of aluminum foil on your face and make a mask. And then the last night, you

wadded your mask up and left it there at camp.

I told the story that night about the musical *Phantom of the Opera*. The story is that there's this man who's been disfigured early in life. And he keeps a mask over his face to hide the scars, the "woundedness" that's there. And he haunts, in a sense, the old opera house, and he hides. He hides up in the rafters so nobody really notices him. He comes and goes. And that seems to work for his life.

Until he makes a connection with the beautiful Christine. He hears her music and it touches his heart. He wants to know her better. In that moment, and at the end of the show, his mask comes off. And he stands there, terrified. Because she can see the terrible scars and woundedness in his face. And he's anticipating that she's going to scream in terror and run away.

That's how some of us feel many times about taking off our mask and being honest about what lies beneath. We're afraid the other person who sees that is going to get up and walk out of the room. We're afraid that God will get up and walk out of the room.

And yet the most beautiful thing happens in *Phantom of the Op-*

era; for Christine is filled with love and compassion for this man. And she takes his face in her hands, and she kisses the side of this face that he's been hiding all this time.

You see, once the mask is off, once we take down our defenses and quit pretending to be something other than who we really are, love can penetrate the heart.

Once what lies beneath is exposed, it can be touched by love and grace. And there won't just be the *appearance* of love and grace, there won't just be the *aroma* of love and grace.

There can be, will be, the real thing.

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