

Faces Firmly Fixed: Losing in Lent

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Rev. Ruth Boven

Luke 12:1-4

“Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy”, says Jesus to his disciples in our text. If you are even a little familiar with the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, you know that Jesus, not only here but often, says some really harsh things about hypocrites. Jesus hates hypocrisy. And so I guess it’s not that surprising that on his journey toward the cross, his face fixed firmly on the end of his earthly journey, Jesus speaks to his disciples once again about that deadly danger.

So what is hypocrisy? And why is it so dangerous? And how do we address this danger in our lives? Well in ancient Greek culture, actors would perform with large masks on which would both depict the characters they were playing and would amplify their voices. The word for such a performer was hypocrite. Today, when we use the term hypocrite, we too are referring to people who wear masks. Metaphorical masks. We’re talking about people who pretend to be something or someone they’re not.

About five years ago Disney followed up on the popular Wizard of Oz with a film called “Oz the Great and Powerful”. In it you meet Oscar, nicknamed Oz, who is a self-centered, cynical, small-time traveling circus magician in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Kansas who dreams of being a “truly great man.” When a prairie twister flings him away to the fairyland that coincidentally shares his nickname, he discovers that its citizens await a prophesied, powerful wizard to free them from the tyranny of the Wicked Witch. Sensing a chance for wealth and fame, Oscar masquerades as this magical messiah. He uses hand-trickery, smooth talk, and sneaky stagecraft to convince people that he is the long-awaited savior. But Oz is a hypocrite. He isn’t who he claims to be. And he knows it.

Of course hypocrites don’t only show up on movie screens. They show up in all kinds of places. They show up in sports as professional athletes who pretend and lie about their reliance on performance-enhancing drugs and shortcuts. They show up in politics as candidates who make promises without any intention of keeping them. They show up in pulpits of churches as pastors who care more about making followers for themselves than about making followers of Jesus.

But hypocrisy isn’t only a problem for people who lead or whose lives are lived more publicly. It’s a problem, a danger, for all of us. Who doesn’t want others to think more highly of you than what is actually true. When gaining the esteem of others is at stake, who doesn’t sometimes pretend that you are a better person than you actually are. I know this. Because I do it too. Why do I run around like a Tasmanian devil picking up a messy house, using hand-trickery to hide things behind closed doors before guests come over? Why do we only post things on social media or tell stories about ourselves that make us appear more attractive, more successful, and more charitable? Well, partly, because we want others to believe we’re better than we are. We do it with friends. We do it in school. We do it as parents. We do it as professionals. We do it at church. We do it all the time.

Neal Plantinga, in a Banner article a few years ago points out that the real danger of hypocrisy is that when we pretend something about ourselves, over time, we start to believe it. He writes, “An actor pretends, but a hypocrite deceives, and eventually one of the persons a

hypocrite deceives is himself. He cannot tell that he is only a half-converted actor. He cannot tell that he is a Christian only in his head but not in his heart. He cannot tell that he is wondrous only in the eyes of people who are just as divided as he is. Above all, a hypocrite cannot tell that he needs Jesus Christ, our Savior.”

Why is hypocrisy so very dangerous? Well, because when we pretend - the mask we wear eventually becomes like a thick heavy armor around us which prevents us from having honest, meaningful relationships with others and with God. It also prevents us from taking an honest look inside ourselves. And when we can't see what's broken in us, we don't see the need to reach out to the only One who can help us lose the burdensome armor we carry. Maybe you know the character, Eustice Clarence Scrubb, from CS Lewis's *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Eustice was an arrogant, self-centered and all around annoying presence to Edmund and Lucy on their quest to save Narnia from oppressive evil. One day Eustice's greediness led him into a dragon's lair where he put on a golden bracelet, fell asleep and woke up as a dragon. At first Eustice delighted at being the biggest thing around, but he eventually realizes he is cut off from his friends, and all humanity, and he feels a huge weight of loneliness and desperately wants to change.

That night, Aslan comes to Eustice and leads him to a large well of water that Eustice longs to get in to ease his pain from that small bracelet he put on when he was human. Aslan told him he had to undress before entering the water. But Eustice found that no matter how many layers of dragon skins he managed to peel off of himself, he was still a dragon. Eustice reported, “Then the lion said – but I don't know if it spoke - ‘You will have to let me undress you’. I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was nearly pretty desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it. The very first tear he made was so deep I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off.... Well he peeled the beastly stuff right off... And there I was as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me – I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on – and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again.”

The Heidelberg Catechism says the first thing we need to know to live and die happily is how great our sins and misery are. It's the truth. But it's a paradox. It's only in enduring the pain of peeling off the layers of pretending – that underneath we find what makes life worth living, what brings joy and hope and peace. The theologian Richard Lischer says it beautifully (in fact you'll find this quote on a canvas in Rev Jonker's office). He says, “As it turns out, what remains in each of us is not the bravado of mastery but the vulnerability of love.”

So friends, what can we do? How do we respond to Jesus' fierce warning against hypocrisy? Three things: First, we live as authentically as we can. We tell the truth. We live integrated lives – meaning we live with integrity between what we do and what we say we do. Who we are and who we say or act like we are. You know, the hard truth about this point is that most of time, like Eustice, we resist the pain of losing our layers until a greater pain comes along. I read this week that it is the destiny of truth to be made known. As Jesus indicated to his disciples - it's not a question about whether the truth about us will be made known. It's a matter of when.

You may remember that King David, the man after God's own heart, was wearing the mask of innocence when one day the prophet Nathan came and told him a story. A story with a

powerful ah-ha moment that shocked David into seeing the horror of his sin with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband. It was the pain of realizing how far he had wandered from the God he loved that hurled him to his knees and to a humble truthfulness about himself. Living authentically means asking for God's Spirit to show us where we have strayed and to lead us in right paths.

Here's the second thing to know about our fight against hypocrisy and it's a clear word of grace. When we lose the bravado, the armor and acknowledge and confess our own untruthfulness, we do so under the wings of the God who loves us and longs for relationship with us. Plantinga points out that, "What makes God's grace so amazing is that it comes not just for the proud and the envious and the angry, but also for us hypocrites. And when it comes, a miracle happens. After all our years of playing a role, we convert to it. We finally become the person we have been practicing for all these years. At last we are in character as sons and daughters of God, just the way we were redeemed to be." If we have any doubt that losing our bravado, our mask, our armor during this time of Lent, will bring us gain, we need only look to Jesus. Who, though he was stripped of everything, even every last bit of clothing, and was made completely vulnerable before all as he hung on a cross of shame - showed us and showed to all the world - that underneath it all is a love - love so strong that it receives us just as we are. Love so strong that it will keep us secure in life and in death.

That's what Charlotte Elliott did. Charlotte lived in the early 1800s and was severely disabled by an early childhood illness. With family all around her endlessly engaged in church life and ministry matters to which she could contribute nothing, Charlotte struggled with whether her relationship with God was authentic and real. One afternoon as the entire family was out working together to raise funds for a good cause – Charlotte was home alone wrestling with what she needed to do, to know the powerful love of God and to be assured of his grace. In that struggle – she wrote these words:

Just as I am – without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,
– O Lamb of God, I come!

Friends, "As it turns out, what remains in each of us is not the bravado of mastery but the vulnerability of love."

Thanks be to God! Amen.

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