

November 5, 2017
Matthew 23:1-12
The Great Pretenders
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Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 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 have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. *Words from God for the people of God. Let us pray: Gracious God, bless these ancient words that indeed they may impart your gift of good news to a people in need of new hope. We pray in Christ’s name, amen.*

Matthew loves to tell the stories of Jesus speaking to the multitudes. They have been among my favorites since I was a child. But unlike the other gospels, Matthew likes to contrast what he tells the multitudes with what he tells his disciples. However, in today’s text, Jesus does something quite unusual that is easy to miss but very important to understand: He addresses the multitude *and* his disciples both at the same time – publicly, in front of each other.

To the crowd, he acknowledges that the Scribes and Pharisees sit in the seat of Moses. In other words they hold a special place ordained by God. They may be full of themselves but they are people with God-given authority. Unlike moves toward change today, Jesus does not advocate tearing down the institution that God was behind starting in the first place. These leaders and this institution of Judaism are still important, says Jesus. You should therefore listen to them, he says.

But then Jesus turns his message towards his disciples and future leaders. Yes, listen to them. But please, don’t behave like them. Ouch.

From there, Jesus levels the scribes and Pharisees with a whole host of criticisms.:

- He says they of say one thing and then do another.
 - He says they remain dressed in the robes of their office for show.
 - He accuses them of putting too heavy a burden on people.
 - He accuses them of liking the best seats, probably getting the best food and eating more of it than the people they serve could ever get.
 - He accuses them of wanting their names sounded in the market, “Rabbi, rabbi.”
 - Basically, he says they have gone too far in being fat and happy, too far in demanding perfection from those who are just trying to survive.

In short, “Your religious leaders,” says Jesus, “Have become . . . hypocrites. Hypocrites.” In the section following the one I just read to you, he calls them that no less than six times. Can you imagine? I mean they are standing right there.

The word, “hypocrite” is a rather interesting one. Our English word is just a transliteration of the Greek word *hypokrites*. It’s a word that comes from the Greek theater. It means literally, a play-actor. In those days, the days of Jesus, Greek actors played many different parts. A man (and it was always a man – who played even the parts of women) a man would run off the stage and get a mask, come back on and play a part, run off the stage and get another mask, and come back on and play another part.

He could play a half dozen or more parts in one Greek drama by the use of masks. These people were called “hypokrites”, or “play-actors.”

Now, *they* did this legitimately. That was their business – to play a role, to play a part. Nothing wrong with that. So as we look at the word – “hypocrite” – we discover that its original meaning was a positive one. It was made up of two Greek roots. “Hypo” which means “under,” and “krites” which means “to judge” or “to evaluate.” So, “hypocrite”, originally meant literally, “one who must be judged ultimately, by that which is under the mask”.

One who is acting as a Christian, then, is one whose character ultimately is determined not by the ability to parrot back the right lines, but by a real ability to ACT with a sense of authenticity out of a real relationship with Christ.

Great actors of stage and film are not just parroting – and they are not just playing a role; they are giving us something of authenticity *from* themselves because they are in a real relationship with that part *of* themselves. They are in touch with that through the particular role they are playing.

So, playing a role, wearing a mask, is not the problem. We all do it. In fact, maintaining a healthy sense of community depends on it. A mask is simply a role that provides a needed function to ensure that the community of which we are a part is whole. Every one of us is capable of wearing a multitude of masks depending on the role each of us is called on to play. And in fact, it is a good idea to ask yourself what, if any, role *you* are in when relating to another.

For instance, I need to *act* a bit differently depending on whether I am called on to wear the mask of father or mother, loving son, faithful husband, loyal friend, responsible employer or dutiful employee. If I say with my mouth what a father needs to say to a son but I am acting more like a betrayed friend, I become a hypocrite or one whose actions are incongruent with the mask.

One might say that a successful foray into adulthood is one that entails learning the attitude and behaviors that are appropriate for whatever mask or role one is called on to play and then finding those within oneself.

So the problem is not the fact that we wear masks or take on roles. The problem is when there is not congruence between our roles and our behavior, our words and our actions – between the

role and who we really are. And perhaps a bigger problem is when we identify too completely with any one of the particular masks we wear, or roles we play – when all we are *is* the mask – all we are *is* the role and we are not in touch with what is underneath – particularly when that role, that mask is as a leader – and *especially* when that role is as a political or religious leader.

Today we elect elders into the office of ministry. In the Presbyterian Church, that office is shared by both ordained Ministers of the Word and Sacrament – like me – and potential elders, like Marcia and Hillary and Don and Cathy – who are nominated and elected by the local church. Those offices, which are set aside in scripture, carry authority, and it is an authority quite apart from the individuals who inhabit it. In that respect, it is like the mask of a Greek actor. However, as important as that mask is, the authenticity of the acting will not be ultimately determined by the mask, or the office. It will be determined by the individual actor underneath who wears it.

We are called, as disciples of Christ and parts of Christ's body, the church, to elect people to the office of elder who we believe will not just foster agendas we agree with, but who are capable of upholding the office, wearing the mask with dignity and integrity.

In the time of Jesus and throughout history, there have always been those who genuinely carry out the highest ideals of a particular mask – a particular office – better than others. What Jesus is saying is that when we have bad actors holding our highest and most noble offices, we are still called to respect the office *and* the person who holds the office. However, we need to be discerning; because the reality is that not all of those acting as our leaders are authentic. Not all who find themselves in leadership are capable of living up to a particular role or office. When that happens, then please do not hold that against the mask or the office. And for heaven's sake don't imitate the actions of the really bad actors who are wearing the mask or holding the office.

The office of elder is an office that promotes a biblical, wholesome, self-aware, God-aware, other-aware, prayerful, servant type of lifestyle that others will want to respect and follow. Thus as a religious leader, the mask, the role, needs to reflect some genuine part of the one holding the office – a part that is truly capable of servant leadership in a church. I am talking about both the ability to lead and to have a real desire to want the best – both for oneself and for one's people – spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically – a desire that one should always be striving for, with God's help.

And if this desire is not there, others see it. You can play a lot of roles in this life and even find rewards in this world for playing them. But “playing” at religious leadership – no less than political leadership, in other words, hypocrisy, hurts everyone.

And the scary fact is, you can read the gospels straight through and not once do you find Jesus saying to a religious hypocrite, one whose actions in office are self-centered and disingenuous, “Your sins be forgiven.” He says it to prostitutes, he says it to deplorable tax collectors, he says it to ne'er do wells. But he never says it to the religious leader who is a hypocrite – a bad actor. He can't.

And the reason he can't is that ‘playing’ at being a religious leader is done in order to justify one's own existence. In such cases, God is not really a part of the picture at all. It is a form of

idolatry where the one holding the office really worships his or her own ego and through the office, invites others to do the same.

It's been said that leaders generally want the front of the bus, the back of the church, and the center of attention. However, in the topsy, turvey world of God, those called to leadership in the church are charged to want the back of the bus, the front of the church and works that are more often, behind the scenes.

But before you breathe a sigh of relief to yourself, thinking that this applies to someone besides you, anyone who accepts the call of Christ to become a disciple is a potential religious leader.

The point of today's text should be in looking for the pretense in one's own life, not just in the lives of our leaders – religious or otherwise. Of all faults, hypocrisy is the easiest to find in our leaders and the most difficult to see in ourselves. But we are all susceptible to the virus of hypocrisy – pretending to be more than we are, professing more than we can live up to – in order to justify ourselves before others.

On a recent visit to E-tae-one, a large market in South Korea where one can buy tons of stuff, a clergy colleague of mine overheard this conversation between a tourist and the shop-keeper. Holding up a jacket, the tourist asked, "What brand is this?" The shop-keeper said, 'What brand would you like it to be?' The tourist told him the brand name preferred and the shop-keeper took that particular label out of a drawer and sewed it onto the jacket.

Labels, like roles, are easy to "sew on" – Christian, Presbyterian, Minister, elder... but that doesn't really identify the true cloth from which one is cut. What identifies the true cloth is not really us at all, but the one who we allow to work through us – Jesus, the Christ.

So, the antidote to this hypocrisy and self-promotion? It's to follow the one who created us. If we do this, we realize quickly that no one, save God, is above anyone.

We are blessed to live in a democracy – the first true democracy on earth, say some. But it was Jesus who first preached genuine democracy and it was because he always put the welfare of people as a whole before that of its leaders. He preaches real democracy by giving voice to the disenfranchised – compared to the shallow, self-serving democracy that is so often practiced in our world today. But to sustain such a fragile thing as a democracy – whether it is the church or our government – we, the people have to live up to the demands of the role of a member of that democracy – a responsible citizen who is looking out for the common good of all.

It is so easy to slip from putting the welfare of all first, to just looking out for number one. We see that every day in every part of life. We see religious leaders bilk people out of their money by preaching a prosperity gospel; and we see public officials from local governments all the way up to the presidency, turning from being interested in helping the cause of the folks that inspired them to run, to just getting elected the next time.

Hypocrisy: the devious thing about it is that it is often an unconscious defect of character. One never questions one's perceived superiority over other people. One assumes that it is as obvious

to others as it is to oneself. So, we hypocrites are a double tragedy: recognized by the world for who we truly are and unable to understand why others do not give way to our rightful place.

But when we earnestly attempt to follow in the Way of Christ, a new opportunity arises – one of genuine servanthood. When we follow that Way, then we discover that the greatest among us is servant to us. We find that whoever exalts himself ends up being debased. Whoever humbles herself is exalted. This great paradox is the antidote to the hypocrisy: that the true leader is truly the servant.

But be warned—it is easy to start out a servant and end up wanting to be at the head of the table. It is much, much harder to be a servant all the time. It is much, much harder to stay on the path of service. It is much, much harder to be a true leader after the way of Jesus.

Who are you really? That seems to be the question at the center of this text. Who are you when you are not playing a role?

I'd like to close with a true story. It took place at an English country house. Often after dinner, at such places, guests are asked to give re-citations, to sing, or use whatever talent they have to entertain the company.

One evening, the then famous actor, Charles Laughton was among the guests at just such an event just outside of London. When it came his turn to perform, he recited the 23rd Psalm, perhaps the most beloved psalm in the psalter. "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want..." His rendition was magnificent, and there was much applause.

At the end of the evening someone noticed a little, old great aunt of the host dozing in a corner. She was deaf as a post and had missed most of what had been going on, but she was urged to get up and recite something. In those days people memorized a lot of poetry. So she stood up, and in her quivery old voice she started, The Lord is my shepherd..., and went on to the end of the psalm, not knowing that it had been recited once before that evening.

When she finished there were tears in the eyes of many at the party. Later one of the guests approached the famous actor. "You recited that psalm absolutely superbly. It was incomparable. So why were we so moved by that funny, little old lady?" Laughton replied, "I know the Psalm. She knows the Shepherd."

And isn't that what it really comes down to? Not *what* you know about leadership roles – but *who* you know and how close you are to Him. That's something that even the greatest actor can't fake. Let us pray.

Loving God, Help us to live up to the high calling to which we are called – whether we are acting as official leaders in your church or are representing you to our family friends and community. Help us to see where we are hypocrites rather than authentic, faithful actors on your behalf. And now, bless these tithes and gifts that they may help us in becoming more like you as we use them to your service. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.