

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Did you ever pretend to be something or someone else when you were a child? If you celebrated Halloween you might have been a space man or a princess, a ghost, or maybe a cowboy or cowgirl. I know I used to like to wear a mask on Halloween but I didn't like wearing a costume, although I had Roy Rogers pajamas, rocking horse, hat, cowboy boots and all the other RR accouterments. Other times I was Tarzan but mom wouldn't let me run around in nothing but a loin-cloth. There were times as I got a bit older, when I would even pretend to be a pastor, I did funerals for various dead birds, etc., and I know I performed marriages, usually my younger brother or sister to the younger sister or brother of a friend. I probably did baptisms too, although I'm not sure about that one.

There came a time of course when I quit pretending. As a teenager I decided that I was what I was and if someone didn't like it, oh well. As an adult I became even more set, entrenched in the idea that what you see is what you get, if you don't like what you see, then you need to tell someone who cares. No costumes, no masks.

But have you noticed how many people still wear costumes? I don't mean the kids on Halloween when they're trick-or-treating, or pretending to be a super hero or Disney princess, but the adults who wear them. Maybe they don't wear costumes so much as they wear a mask. As you heard me read in our gospel this morning, Jesus certainly noticed it. It was a definite problem back then because many of the Pharisees and scribes were pretending to be what they were not. They exalted themselves as particularly pious, religious men of God, but Jesus told people to do as they taught, but not as they did.

Things back then were becoming distorted, rules, regulations, doctrine, all of it became an end in themselves, designed to help people keep God's precepts, they instead became more important than what came originally from God. Of course for what we might call religious professionals back then, it was easy to keep all these manmade rules, regulations and doctrines. But for everyone else, merchants and those who worked at a trade, these rules, regulations and doctrines became burdens. The scribes and the Pharisees wore costumes, masks, not in the literal sense, but they were playing at a role, doing it for recognition from everyone else, not in service to God.

But Jesus tells his disciples that they are to be different, they are not going to stand above everyone else, they are to be brothers and sisters in the faith, no one of them lording it over another. "The greatest among you will be your servant," Jesus says, in other words we put others before ourselves, we don't wear masks or costumes, instead we are to serve one another, tending to their needs. Quite different from the scribes and Pharisees who did "not practice what they teach." And you and I follow a teacher who practiced what he taught, who taught what he practiced, who came to serve as a ransom for many, sacrificing his life for others including you and me.

Jesus lived a humble life, it wasn't a pretense, he wasn't wearing a mask, he wasn't dressed up as someone he wasn't.

Notice now that what Jesus calls us to do is totally different from the rhetoric, the attack ads, the constant negative bombast from politicians, would-be politicians, talking heads and the like, who often profess to be Christians but fail to demonstrate their beliefs, who fail to demonstrate Christ's teachings in their lives and especially in their public utterances and attack ads. I remember being told by an adult more than once as a child words to the effect of "do what I say, not what I do", their own behavior giving the lie to their words. I had problems with that kind of thing when I was a child, I have even bigger problems with it now.

Now you may think I'm too hard on these public figures, and on others, perhaps even those of our own fellowship, but then consider Jesus' words: "all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Consider your own behavior, your own life, if you're like many folks who attend church, you may be moved by the hymns, by the sermon, by the readings, by our kids, you leave feeling refreshed, even promising to really step out in faith and discipleship from that point on. You might even put a little extra in the offering plate although I'm not too sure about that one.

So you walk out of here or leave our coffee hour, and perhaps sometime during the following week you realize you've left your discipleship behind. Not intentionally of course, and perhaps it varies from week to week. Life, everyday life, often seems to interfere with our intentions. Making a living, planning your trip south, going to see the grandkids, wanting to make sure that things go the way you want them to, whether involving other people or not, and we find ourselves not practicing what we preach, or for that matter, what I preach.

So Pastor Bruce, you ask, what's the answer. It's grace, the grace of God, forgiving and giving, loving and comforting us, holding us up, sustaining us, calling us again and again to love God, to love neighbor, to love one another as Jesus loves us, to serve, to give, to forgive, to love, to be disciples as best we are able, to join with that cloud of witnesses that surround us as faithful saints of the Lord!

AMEN.