

Behind the Mask

Luke 18:9-14; 19:1-10; Isaiah 1:10-17

CWZepp, BWCOB, October 31, 2010

So earlier this week I was telling a friend about my early business ventures on my elementary school bus. It started when I realized that my peers on the bus would pay me up to a dollar for a single stick of gum that generally cost five cents at the store. So, being the forward thinking type, I began to use my own meager allowance to buy several 25 cent packs of gum a week, which I would then sell by the stick to my “friends” on the school bus. On a good day, I could turn a profit of \$9.50 on a 50 cent investment. Unfortunately, my mother put an end to that business venture when she became suspicious of why I suddenly had so much spending money. My first lesson in the pitfall of conspicuous consumption.

But I did learn one of the basic economic rules of supply and demand – people are willing to pay you a pretty penny for providing what they want or need *when* they want or need it. Another case in point: About ten years ago, three companies in South Korea began selling – and I swear I am not making this up – scented suits. These suits actually come with small fragrance capsules laced right into the fabric, and all you have to do to release the scent is to rub your hands over the suit. Its basically scratch and sniff menswear. They say the average life span of these smelly suits is about 3 years, or roughly 15-20 dry cleanings. I’m not sure if that lifespan is based on the capsules “half-life” or on usage, but at the rate I use formalwear, I suspect that one could last me for a very long time.

But I have to say, the marketing of these suits, which debuted during the bleak economic climate in Korea at the turn of the millennium, is where the real brilliance lies. One of the initial catch phrases for them was “controlling myself with the fragrance.” And in the hard-drinking male culture of South Korea, the basic idea was that you could have your fun and relieve your stress without paying the price for it at home. One young office worker was quoted by Reuters as saying, “Without [my lavender scented suit], my parents would be all over me because of the stench of soju (Korean liquor) and spicy sidedishes after nights out with my colleagues and friends. It’s a huge relief since I no longer have to pour cheap cologne all over me. All I have to do now is just shake and shimmy in front of my house, and then go in with a frown on my face, saying, 'Man, I hate nightshifts'.”

I am often amazed by the things that people will buy. Things like sticks of gum with a 1900% markup. And if you’d have told me you were going to try to sell a \$400 scratch and sniff suit, I probably would have laughed, just like I would’ve laughed had you told me that you were going to try to sell large quantities of rubber bands to kids and adults by producing them in various silly shapes and colors.

But after thinking about it, I am actually not amazed that these scented suits have been a success or that some Korean men are now on their 3rd or 4th generation of suits. And that’s not just because people are suckers and will buy anything. Rather, it is because people are people, and if there is one thing that remains consistent about human nature, it is that we will go to great lengths to try to hide our flaws – to cover up that which we or others find undesirable. It is a basic characteristic of our human nature, one that we deal with in every phase of life from cradle to grave. But there are some situations and circumstances that intensify and magnify this effort. The

world of politics is a good example. There might be no greater sin for politicians or political candidates than to admit that they have a weakness or have done anything wrong in the past, and a single gaffe can spell political doom. So they go to great lengths to show voters not only why they are the perfect candidate for the job, but also why they are pretty much perfect people. Meanwhile, they will usually try to uncover the flaws – both personal and professional – of their opponents. The pressure of being in the public eye, and the accompanying necessity of always trying to hide flaws and project only perfection, is surely exhausting and ultimately a distraction from the real issues.

Unfortunately, there is a very similar pressure and dynamic that plays out in the church. Speaking personally, as a pastor I know very well the pressure of living in the proverbial fishbowl – trying to measure up to not just my own expectations but also to those of everyone in the congregation and beyond. Heck, I can't even get dressed in the morning without thinking about how people will perceive my choice of clothing. But more than what I will wear or not wear, I always need to be careful about how much of my true self I reveal. When I go through a crisis of faith or when I am having trouble at home, when I have a moral lapse or when I am bitter and angry over some wrong done to me, real or perceived, I can't let my problems become a stumbling block for others. I am not supposed to lose my temper, be immature, or do anything that anyone would find objectionable. When you work for the church as I do, you're supposed to maintain a spotless record.

But that pressure does not exist only among the leadership of the church; it also extends to church members and even to the broader culture. I read an article once stating that in today's culture, many people see an invisible sign over church doors that reads: "PERFECT PEOPLE ONLY". It went on to say that we have embraced to a large degree the notion that the church is where all the "good" people gather to say pleasant things and celebrate that they are not like "the world". Will Willimon says that "too often we unintentionally present the Christian faith as if it were for the "winners" – those who are a success at both life and belief." So the pressure I feel as a professional pastor is merely the reality of having my job security tied to being a "good" Christian, whatever that ultimately means.

Which brings me to our scriptures for this morning. In the first parable we are met by two people: one much like myself...a "good" person who has tried to walk the straight and narrow to become a respected religious leader, the other, one who has failed to please his fellows and is despised by almost everyone. It's a familiar story – one that at first glance appears to be able to be summed up in a few words Humility: good. Arrogance: bad. But like so many of the Jesus parables, we are so used to hearing this stuff that it no longer carries any surprise for us. We have heard enough stories of Jesus that it doesn't shock us when he criticizes the Pharisees – we are used to them being the villains. We so easily forget that the exact opposite was true in Jesus' time – back when the Pharisees were the good guys. In fact, some have suggested that Jesus may have even been one of the Pharisees, and that the reason he was so critical of them is that they were his peers and he expected more of them as he did of himself.

At any rate, the vision we often get of this Pharisee is of a loud-mouthed, pompous braggart, praying publicly and arrogantly of all his virtues while looking down his nose at others. But let's look again. What the text says is that the Pharisee was actually standing apart from others, and was praying to or with himself. There really is no indication that he was even praying out loud so others could hear. And although the substance of the Pharisee's prayer seems arrogant to us in the 21st century, it was actually a recognizable formula based on a common rabbinic expression of

Thanksgiving written in the Talmud – the authoritative collection of the Jewish tradition. In fact, it bears a remarkable similarity to Psalm 26, which in some Bible's carries the title "The Prayer of a Good Person".

Unfortunately, this story is one of the places where Eugene Peterson allows his interpretative biases to influence his paraphrasing of the scripture in *The Message* version from which we read today. But the Pharisee in all likelihood was indeed to be viewed as a good man – leading a life of obedience to the law of God and making choices that he understood to be ordained by God. And most people would have seen him as such – one to be admired and appreciated for his religious faithfulness in obeying the law. And his prayer, well, it was a prayer of Thanksgiving – he didn't ask God for anything, but rather seemed content with his lot in life. I'm not sure that the original hearers of Jesus' parable would have thought badly of the Pharisee's prayer, even his comparisons to others. For he was indeed not like those others, and he should rightly be thankful that he had been able to lead a good life unlike so many others. And if we think about it, it isn't much different than those of us who thank God for our food at a meal knowing that not everyone enjoys such privilege. The thanksgiving comes in noting that others are not so blessed and that we are fortunate just to be eating.

And this tax collector, well we are quick to make this fellow into a good hearted saint. As one author put it, we characterize the tax collector as Generous Joe the bartender or Goldie the Good-Hearted Hooker. But no one in Jesus' day would have sympathized with the tax collector. He would have been despised by nearly all for making choices that made him a traitor to his own people and his own faith, all to his own financial benefit. It was right that he remain far away from the Temple, for his own choices earned him that place, and he was reaping the rewards of his lifestyle and his behavior.

Now in the second New Testament reading, the familiar story of Zacchaeus, we see a very similar dynamic at play for a real life tax collector whom Jesus meets. It would have been absolutely scandalous for Jesus to, as Peterson puts it, "get cozy with this crook."

But I think we miss the point when we read these stories trying to figure out who are the good guys and bad guys. In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, those designations are intentionally blurred by Jesus. And in the story of Zacchaeus, such designations don't seem to matter to Jesus. Likewise, I think we also miss the point when we make these stories into morality tales – taking away lessons about how we are to be humble and repentant like these fabled tax collectors.

Rather, I think the point at the heart of both of these stories is captured well in Peterson's wording of the end of the first parable: "If you are content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."

As I have read and heard these parables time after time, I have become more and more aware of an emotional reaction that I have to both of them. As I see Jesus announcing that these two tax men were made right with God, in spite of all their many faults, I find myself wishing I could be more like them. Not in the sense of making similar kinds of life choices. But in the sense of having nothing to lose, nothing to hide behind, completely open and public in my human frailty, and completely able to receive the grace of God.

Because so often, I am not like that. So often I spend my time hiding behind my public face, behind my reputation, behind an image that I have so carefully crafted over the years. So often I refuse to be just myself, and I hide behind a mask of my own making. It's a mask that I wear because I am afraid. I am afraid of judgment. I am afraid of ridicule. I am afraid of what other people will think of me if they knew the real me. Now I haven't bought any of those scented suits they sell in Korea – wouldn't do me much good unless they started making scented hats or jeans. But I have invested in other means of masking the parts of me I don't want others to see. I don't control myself with the scent – I control myself with a mask.

And I wish I could say that it was better in the church, that I felt like I could be more myself in the community of faith. But in fact, it's often worse. Because too often we come together and we come to worship as if we were coming to a masquerade ball. We dress up in our "Sunday best" costumes and put on our "happy" faces. We get our "Sunday School" answers ready and clear our calendars for an hour or two of religious face time. And then we go our separate ways, and when we get home and take off our religious masks, we are no worse – but no better – than before. And sometimes I wonder, why do we do it all?

This morning as I was taking my shower and getting dressed to come here for worship, I was still debating whether or not I should wear this princess costume. I knew that doing so would make a lot of youth in our Jr. High group happy. But I also knew that some of you would be bothered by it, just as some of you are bothered when I wear jeans or shorts or Hawaiian shirts or sneakers or whatever it happens to be. But then I realized that my choice of attire today or any day, whatever it might be, should not be a distraction from worship – rather it is that very internal debate that I was having that was the real distraction from worship. The very fact that I was questioning what would or would not be acceptable for worship – that is the distraction.

Today is Halloween, and in celebrating many of us have or will put on masks and costumes, disguising our selves as a part of a great cultural charade that we have created. But faith is not a game, though we often treat it like it is. And today I hear God calling us through the voice of Isaiah to quit our "worship charades" and our "religious games." And I hear Jesus calling us to take off our religious masks, assuring us through these two stories about tax men that if we want to become more than we are, the first step is showing up just as we are.

I believe the church has a high calling in this world – to be the body – the hands and feet – of Christ in the world. I believe we are called to bring hope and peace, justice and abundant life to a hurting world. But I also believe we have let that vision languish by allowing our following of Jesus to be trumped by our religious charades. Too often our vision of that high calling has been limited and skewed by the masks we wear, causing us to not be able to see far beyond ourselves, beyond these religious games we play on Sunday mornings.

So this Halloween, let's remember this: God doesn't care about our religious charades. God doesn't care about our religious costume or our religious mask. God cares about what is behind the mask. God wants us to get that right. So let's try going without them. For the sake of ourselves, for the sake of one another, and for the sake of the world – a world that needs real people – not perfect people.