

Scripture:  
Matthew 23:1-12

### **Do We Have Enough?**

Now that we have talked to the children about the masks that they might wear I wonder if we might admit to some of ours. Is there anything that you hide behind? Your degrees, your titles, your clothes, your athleticism, your servanthood, your faith, your duty, your pride, your humour? Is there anything you place in front of you so that others don't see or know who you really are?

If your answer is no you are a rare breed. It's interesting that Halloween has become one of if not the biggest celebration of the year in Canada. A day when we get to pretend we are someone or something else. What is so appealing about that? Perhaps that is exactly what Jesus is talking about. Not Halloween, but our insistence on pretending we are someone or something we are not. Perhaps Jesus is saying it's time to take off the masks and reveal your true identity.

See most of us are like one of these little Russian Dolls we start out quite large but when you get down to the core of who we are it is quite small - quite tangible. It's not that all of those layers are always bad, they are only bad when they are used to cover up our true self to try and mask our fears or live out our pride rather than our authentic self. The masks are bad when we use them to power over or influence in a negative way.

Now I'm not talking about professionalism, or tack, or appropriate behavior because we know that at times we are in situations where giving our direct opinion will not be helpful in fact it could be hurtful or damaging. But these are not the situations I am speaking of.

So often we cover ourselves up with so many titles and layers that we loose who we were created to be. We loose sight of our life calling. **We** might even forget who we are. We do the same thing in church and in faith. We forget our purpose, who we are, what has brought us here. We wrap ourselves up in rules and rituals and forget the core of our faith.

Look around the room - what if we were to loose some of our key symbols of church and faith.

- What if tomorrow someone came into my office and thought - "That would make a great ghost costume" and suddenly my robe was nowhere to be found? Could I still preach?
- What if someone decided it was time to wash the plate and chalice and lost it on their way home? Would that change the meaning of this table?
- What if someone took down our banners to decorate their own apartment? Would we forget what we are here to worship?

- What if there was an earthquake and the cross fell and broke?
- Or someone broke into the church and somehow stole the communion table? And the baptismal fount and the sound system...
- What if all these things were gone.
- Would we still be able to worship? Would we still have our faith? Would we bother to gather - how could we everything is gone.
- Would we bother? After all nothing we stand for is left.

Is that true?

If no - then what? What do we have? \_\_\_\_\_

We have community, we have each other. God hasn't left. Jesus and Spirit haven't skipped town. Our purpose is still here. Our faith isn't about these things. We didn't create God, Spirit and faith they all existed long before us and they will exist long after we are gone. We are being called to remember what we look like and the status we hold is not what is important. This reminds me of a quote from our Stewardship weekend "Stewardship is everything I do after I say I believe."

But our stewardship then becomes irrelevant if we don't know what we believe. When our status becomes about who we are and what we do in the church; or How long we have been here, how much we have served, or how much money we offer we have lost the point. We become just like the scribes and the pharisees and with Jesus we would say "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 marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi" Even in our positions in the church we can use our power negatively.

Now position or Power, in itself, is not bad. Sometimes we unthinkingly assume it is; especially we Canadians, who have always had a strong anti-authoritarian streak in our collective psyche. One author wrote of the Aussies the following which I think fits for us Canadians well. "We tend to regard *power* as a necessary evil rather than as a God-given good, and yet we don't seem to engage much in real attempts to understand or rethink or reform the way power is handled. In the end we take the status quo just as much for granted as any other nation, and this is, I think, just as true of our attitudes to how power is handled in the church."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> A sermon on Matthew 23:1-12 by Nathan Nettleton, 2 November 2008

In the Bible power cannot be seen as intrinsically evil, because power is one of the attributes of God. In fact “power” is one of the most frequent words used to name the Holy Spirit: the power of God. We sometimes shy away from this, because the misuse of power has given it such a bad name that we are a bit embarrassed to attribute it to God. ...But the fact that God is a God of power and might does not mean that God’s power and use of power look anything like what we are used to seeing in the world around us. What we are used to seeing, as Jesus is pointing out in this story, is the misuse and the flaunting of power.

We use our power, our ritual, our symbols at times as an end in themselves. Rather than recognizing our faith, our rituals, our prayers, and our church are there to help us live differently, to transform us to a better way. Our lives become about maintaining our power and our structure, about holding control rather than recognizing the new life and possibilities around us.

Unfortunately it is also somehow ingrained in us to be impressed by power. We reward often with titles and honored seats. We elect those who have the loudest voice, or seem to hold the most authority over. We support those who seem strong and unshaken.

Nathan Nettleton told this story in a former sermon. “At the ordination service last week, I had a conversation with a pastor named Len Lewis who was led the ordination prayer and was celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of his own ordination. He was talking about other people who had been ordained around the same time as him, and one of them was, many years later, disgraced for serial sexual abuse of people in his pastoral care. Len was the one who had had to confront this man with the allegations and evidence. He told me that afterwards, the then General Superintendent of the district had said to him, “I didn’t know you had the strength.” As I thought about that later, and especially as I began to reflect on these words from Jesus, I realized that it would be almost impossible in our culture to hear that as a compliment. Even though it is acknowledging strength now, our culture loves the appearance and image of strength, and so for a leader to be told that no one had previously noticed his strength would usually be a put down. And yet I’m guessing that Jesus would regard those words to Len as a huge compliment, even if they weren’t intended as such. Because good power and strength, the sort of power and strength that Jesus reveals, is not known in appearance and image, and is only seen when it is required. Len proved himself strong when it mattered, but he hadn’t been posturing and imposing his power when it didn’t. And I suspect that that is one of the reasons he is still in pastoral ministry fifty years later. He took his lessons in power from Jesus, and not from the norms of the world around him.”<sup>2</sup>

The kind of power Jesus revealed and demonstrated was not power to maintain an image or personal gain. Jesus used power to lift up the outcast. Jesus empowered and advanced the cause of others who did not have power. The kind of power we most often see is self-serving even in our little communities of church and faith. What if our church and faith life became about caring for the outcast, or the widows, and orphans, those who need support likely even more than we do.

---

<sup>2</sup> IBID

Then we might use the right kind of power “the power demonstrated by Jesus, seeks to share itself, to give itself away, and to lift others up. It does not see itself as being threatened by lack of attention or by the growing confidence and independence of others.”<sup>3</sup>

So what is it that we need to let go of to discover that in God’s grace we have enough. We don’t need more power, we need to empower all the world.

I quoted from Joyce Rupp last week and her words are speaking to me still. She wrote “Each year as I begin to notice that the leaves are going golden, I reflect that the trees seem to give themselves over to the “letting go” process much more freely than humans....We humans have a lot to learn from autumn trees. No one of us wants to be so surrendered, so vulnerable to winter as the October trees. Yet each of us, if we are truly open to growth and change, will experience this in our inner selves. Our relationships and our experiences of life will ask us to be open, to be willing to let go in order that new growth can come...

New growth means change, Trees tell us this. Life tells us this. Jesus tells us this. One of the most beautiful aspects of the Incarnation is that the Son of God allowed himself to be vulnerable. He came as one of us and he opened himself up in love to the possibility of failure, being wounded, misunderstood, and rejected, all of those things that we know as “daily dyings,” like those autumn leaves fast falling from trees.”<sup>4</sup>

Every time Jesus opened himself to others, every time he reached out or spoke up, every time he touched or received from others he allowed himself to be vulnerable. He held no official title and authority but he was noticed, he altered the world in his vulnerable, servant state. People questioned him all the time - “How can he talk like that? Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners? How does he have such wisdom?” and the list goes on.

We as individuals and as a congregation are in a prime time to display vulnerable power. We can choose to hold onto all we have, or we can choose to risk in sharing and caring and empowering others. Most of us are likely here because we want to be people who are different, because we want to know how to better love our God and neighbours. C.S. Lewis says this. “To love at all is to be vulnerable.” The only way we can be sure we won’t be hurt or wounded is to open up to no one, risk nothing, give our heart to no one, and never be vulnerable. “If we do this, then we lock our heart up in a tomb of selfishness where it will eventually become ‘unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.’”<sup>5</sup>

Each of these authors are talking about the risk of letting go and being vulnerable to where God is taking you. Each of them is talking about putting love first. Like the autumn trees we are being asked to shed what has had its life, what is no longer necessary while we remain rooted in the foundations of who we are. Lois Wilson the first female moderator of the UCC reminded the

---

<sup>3</sup> IBID

<sup>4</sup> Rupp, Joyce Fresh Bread pg. 129

<sup>5</sup> IBID

court in a difficult season “We are all in this room because of Jesus.” We are all in this room because of Jesus. Because we long to know how to live more like him, more abundantly, more fully, more like God created us to be.

So today is not about asking you to get rid of all of you symbols, religious rituals, rites and ways of doing things. Today isn't even about asking you to give up your power. Today is about asking you to remember who you are as individuals and church. Who God is calling you to be? We are being called to love more fully as a little church community. And so in life and in church let me ask us. Are there things that you need to let go of? (Worries, ways of holding power over, titles and status that you use at times inappropriately?) Are there ways you can be more open, more vulnerable, more willing so that others might be empowered? Are the ways in which you too might be a part of creating a new way of being in this place and in our world? We have enough - in our life, in our faith, and in our God.

And so I pray, Holy God may we be honest in our letting go - and open in our creating more.

Amen