

“Pretense: the Bane of Our Existence”

Lent is a season of reflection ... a time to examine our relationship with God and see if there is room for improvement. Over the last four Sundays, my messages have focused on scriptures that encourage us to be in a right relationship with God. A right relationship requires change on our part, and such changes mean the acknowledgement as well as the repentance of our sins. Lent, therefore, is an opportunity to let go ... give up ... surrender our spiritually destructive behavior. The Lenten scriptures have called for us to tear down the walls of hostility ... those barriers ... those sins that hinder us from experiencing wholly and fully God’s grace.

Over the last several weeks, my messages have named and examined four specific sins: (1) self-glorification ... defined as our ability to succumb to the temptations of material wealth, power, and security; (2) gluttony ... defined as our craving desire to live an excessive lifestyle; (3) idolatry ... defined as our tendency to give allegiance to the solutions of this world rather than to loyalty to God; and (4) resentment ... defined as our deep-seated anger that at times boils over and prevents us from accepting God’s forgiveness. This morning I want to examine a fifth barrier ... the sin known as *pretense* or pretentiousness.

There is an old familiar saying: If you squawk like a duck, talk like a duck and walk like a duck, then you are a duck or at least close to it regardless of who you may pretend to be or what rationales you come up with to deny who you actually are. Pretense is a problem for everyone, and it develops early on in our life. The childhood games of “let’s pretend” that are played out in “playing house,” or “playing school,” or “playing army” are reflective of an inclination to claim to be other than who we are.

While harmless in childhood, a make-believe world becomes harmful in adulthood when the lines are blurred between what really is and what really isn’t. The deep-seated problem becomes one of “playing a role” rather than being our true self. The irony is that playing a role is always more difficult. Supreme Court Justice Brandeis once told his daughter when she became frustrated about her life: “My dear, if you would only be yourself, things would be so much easier for you!”

Today’s Gospel lesson places Jesus near Jerusalem preparing to enter triumphantly under the banner of waving palm branches. Currently, Jesus is staying with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. When they sit down to eat, we witness the love for Jesus expressed by Mary. We learn about “extravagant love.” Mary takes the most precious thing she possesses and spends it all on Jesus. Mary’s example teaches us that love is not love ... if it conveniently calculates the cost. Love gives it’s all and the only regret is that it has not still more to give. Also, we learn of love’s humility. In Jesus’ time anointing a person’s head was a sign of honor, as well expressed in the 23rd Psalm: *Thou anointest my head with oil.*

That said, however, Mary would not look so high as to the head of Jesus; she anoints his feet. The last thing Mary thought of was to confer an honor upon Jesus; she never dreamed she was good enough for that. Her love is not self-conscious. Mary wipes Jesus’ feet with the hair of her head. In Palestine, no respectable woman would ever appear in public with her hair unbound. “On the day a girl was married her hair was bound up, and never again would she be seen in public with her long tresses flowing loose.” Unbound hair was the sign of an immoral woman.

But I’m sure that never crossed Mary’s mind. Mary loved Jesus, and it meant nothing to her what others thought. Mary’s behavior stands in contrast with today’s believers who are, at times, self-conscious about showing their Christian faith ... concerned about what others might think about them. Interestingly, our lesson foreshadows the week to come. Mary’s loving action towards Jesus brought out Judas’ true character!

Judas Iscariot is quick to object to Mary’s extravagance. He did so on the *pretense* that the perfume could have been sold and the profits given to the poor. A compelling consideration, except that Judas didn’t mean it. In recording this story, John parenthetically writes: *Judas said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; Judas kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.* Judas’ *pretentious* concern is an attempt to cover a fatal flaw in his character ... a flaw that leads to his terrible act of treachery. In the character of Judas, we learn three things.

First, we learn of Jesus' trust in Judas. Early in John's Gospel, we are told that Jesus is aware that there is a traitor within the ranks. It may well be that Jesus tried to touch Judas' heart by making him the treasurer of the disciples. It may well be that Jesus was saying in effect: "Judas, here's something that you can do for me. Here is proof that I need you and want you." That appeal failed with Judas, but the fact remains that often the best way to reclaim someone, who is on the wrong path, is to treat them not with suspicion but with trust ... not as if we expect the worst, but as if we expect the best.

Second, we learn about the law of temptation. Jesus would not have put Judas in charge of the moneybox unless Judas had capabilities in that direction. One commentator says: *Temptation commonly comes through that for which we are naturally fitted.* If a person is fitted to handle money, their temptation may be to regard money as the most important thing in the world. If a person is fitted to occupy a place of prominence, their temptation may be to think first and foremost of reputation. If a person has a particular gift, their temptation may be to become conceited about that gift. Judas had a gift for handling money and became so fond of it that he became a thief and then a traitor for money's sake. Temptation struck Judas at the point of his special gift. This may well explain today's political and corporate corruption.

Third, we learn how a person's view can be warped. Judas had just witnessed an action of surpassing loveliness, and he called it extravagant waste. Judas was an embittered man, and he took an embittered view of things. A person's sight depends on what is inside them. We see only what we are fit and able to see. If we like a person, they can do little wrong. If we dislike a person, we may misinterpret their finest action. A warped mind brings a warped view of things. If we find ourselves becoming very critical of others and imputing unworthy motives to them, we should stop and first examine ourselves.

Though Judas is one of the twelve, he only pretended to be a disciple. He had other motives that were self-centered. His words did not match his actions. He pretended to be concerned for the poor, when in fact he was concerned about his bank account. He pretended to be close to Jesus, when in fact his kiss betrayed Jesus. If Judas would have been the disciple he was called to be and used his talents to help Jesus, he would have been a lot happier. But instead, he used his talents and his position to get close to Jesus, in order to control ... manipulate ... and "feather his pocket."

John does not soften or pretend to call Judas any less than he is: "thief." Today, Judas would have hired a public relations firm to spin his actions, and we read that Judas did nothing morally wrong; that he was only "ethically challenged" or that he lacked "honest enhancement." There is no need to pretend. Judas was a thief. Judas was a liar. Judas was a traitor. Our world, our country, our times would be so much better, if leaders stopped denying ... stopped pretending and massaging disastrous, tragic events with soften, politically correct words. For example: "revenue enhancement" to mean taxes, or the one I read the other day for death ... "negative patient care outcome." And please, there is no debate: the war in Iraq is currently a civil war ... and what is happening in Darfur is genocide ... and yes, the planet is heating up because of CO2 emissions. The sin of pretense is the bane of our existence ... even within the Body of Christ!!

A group of children, confined to a basement play area on a rainy day, decided to "play church." One child was the preacher, another the organist, a couple of kids ushers, and the rest served as the congregation. One little guy said, "What about Jesus? Shouldn't Jesus be in church?" The rest agreed and the child who raised the question was made Jesus. "What do I do," he asked? "How do I play Jesus?" He was told by some of the older children that they would tie him up to one of the support posts in the basement pretending that it was the Cross. Then the others would call him names, throw things at him, and be mean to him in others ways. The little boy thought about that, and then said, "I don't want to play Jesus ... let's just play church."

As the Season of Lent draws to a close and we confront once again the crucifixion of Jesus, we are reminded of the cross each of us is asked to take up and bear in the name of Christ. To leave out the Cross is just to play church. Let us not pretend otherwise. In order to get to Easter, we must go through Good Friday. There is no resurrection without crucifixion. Let us be ourselves before God, honest and lacking in pretense. God knows who we are. But do we know who we are? During the next two weeks, stop and think ... who are you pretending to be? Then give up those pretenses.

There is need for change! There is need for growth! There is need for deeper faith! "If you would only be yourself, things would be so much easier for you!" It is the real you that God loves ... it is the real you for whom Jesus dies ... it is for the real you that Easter is meant to be. Let us not merely "play Christian" or "play church." Let us be Christ's servants ... willing, able, and committed to "walk with Jesus" to Jerusalem ... and to the Cross ... and beyond!