

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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Unmasked

Rev. Jason Freyer

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Which is the disguise?

I hate to break it to you, though I disguise it well with my clothes and hobbies, but your pastor is a bit of a nerd. One of the best debates that nerds can get in to, especially comic book nerds like me, is “Which one is the mask, and which one is the real person?” When Bruce Wayne wears the cowl and cape, is that his disguise? Or is he really Batman, and Bruce Wayne is the disguise? Is Superman constantly dressing up like a nerd to trick people, or does the nerdy guy have really awesome superpowers? Is Bruce Banner a very smart scientist with breath taking anger management issues, or is the Hulk a powerful being afraid of how smart he is?

You could have that debate for hours. Which one is the mask? But it turns out, this debate extends to real life too. Kids have experienced this with their teachers, but I have also been on the receiving end of it with my profession. Say hypothetically you happen to catch either your teacher or your pastor out in the wild, like at a grocery store. Are they the same person you know from school or church? Do they act differently? Does the health teacher have a whole bunch of cookies in her cart? Is the pastor making a less than convincing show of hiding his displeasure at the slowness of the self-checkout? Are we the same person inside and out? What masks are we all wearing?

The truth is, we all struggle with wearing masks from time to time, don't we? In this passage, Paul has some words to say to us about that.

Let Love be Genuine

Paul starts this passage with such a great little four word expression: *let love be genuine*. Actually, in Greek, there are only two words happening here: *Agape anypokritos*. Agape is love, we've spent sometime talking about that. The other word has at it's root the word *hypocritimai*, where we get our word hypocrite. Actually, this is a word from stage acting, which literally means "to answer from under a mask." Paul puts a negative article in front of it, so that if I were going to translate this phrase literally, it would be something like "love cannot speak from behind a mask."

We know this feeling, right? We've had the "friend" who is constantly talking behind our backs. We've all known the people who try to look good, but don't actually lift a finger to do good in the world. We know people who will be one person in one context, and someone completely different in another. And if we're honest, maybe we've been that person from time to time in our lives. Maybe we've spoken love from behind a mask.

This serves as a set up for the rest of this section of Scripture. Everything that follows is how Paul explains Christians ought to love in the world without the mask. Now, from time to time during the announcements here, Laura will say "There are so many announcements, I'm going to trust you to read them all, but let me highlight a few." That's what we're going to do with this long passage, I'm going to trust you to read it on your own. But for this morning, let me highlight a few things here.

Mutual affection

Another commentary I was reading this week said that this phrase “mutual affection” is better understood as the concept of kinship. I just finished reading a fantastic book, *Tattoos on the Heart* by Father Gregory Boyle. Father Boyle is a priest who works in LA in the heart of gang country, ministering to who he calls “homeboys” and “homegirls,” and trying his best to get them out of gang life. He writes a whole chapter on kinship, and has this magnificent story as an example.

One day, I have three homies in my car as I am headed to give a talk. While there, they will set up a table and sell Homeboy/Homgirl merchandise. Our banter in the car spans the range of bagging on each other. We laugh a lot, and I am distracted enough to not notice that the gas tank is on empty. I lean into JoJo, the homie occupying (the front seat).

“Oye dog, be on the look out for a gas station.”

He doesn't seem to wholly trust my judgement. He leans toward the gas gauge and dismisses my call.

“You're fine,” he says.

“I'm fine—I'm on E!” Waving at him, I say “Hello! E means Empty.”

Jojo looks at me with bonafide shock.

“E means empty?”

“Well yeah, what did ya think it meant?”

“Enough”.

“Well, what did ya think F stood for?”

“Finished.”

After I think him for visiting our planet—I realize that this is exactly how the dismantling proces has to play itself out. Homies stare into the mirror and pronounce EMPTY. Our collective task is to suggest instead ‘ENOUGH’

Or if their verdict is “FINISHED,” we are asked to lead them instead to “fullness”— the place within—where they find in themselves exactly what God had in mind.”¹

Love one another with a kinship like *that*, Paul says. Outdo one another in doing that: find the people who think that they’re on EMPTY, and tell them that they are enough. Find the people who think they are FINISHED and help them find God’s fullness. And then go get more. Find more people who need to hear that. Find *everyone* who needs to hear that. And outdo each other in living into that kind of kinship. When you do that, you’ll love without the mask.

Do not lag in zeal.

At this point, I would usually say “I’m not trying to brag,” but you know what? In this moment, I am trying to brag. Because yesterday I finished the second of two 6,000 word essays, bringing a close to this semester of the doctoral program. When the sun rose yesterday, I had to write just over 1,500 words, which is a little less than a sermon. I bring all of this up because yesterday is a fine example: I know what it means to lag in zeal.

I had absolutely no zeal to get done what needed to be done yesterday. Before I wrote that paper, I took my car to the car wash. Before I wrote that paper, I cleaned the interior of my car (anyone who has ever been in my car with me for any length of time knows what desperate measures I have already reached here). Before I wrote that paper, I spent about thirty minutes setting up the to-do list for the day, which had exactly

¹ *Tattoos on the Heart* by Father Gregory Boyle, page 193

one item on it: finish the paper. Before I wrote that paper, I watched about three or four YouTube videos on how to write, and set yourself up for success. I swear, before I wrote that paper, I watched a YouTube video on how to avoid procrastination!

And then, only when I had *completely* run out of ways to distract myself did I sit down at the computer and start pounding away on the keyboard.

How many things will we allow to distract us from the task at hand? Of course we now that we want to love without the mask...but before we do that we'd better make sure that our church attendance record is up to snuff. Of course we know that we want to love without the mask...but before we do that we'd better make sure that we've spent enough time in Bible study. Of course we know that we want to love without the mask...but before we do that we'd better clean up the memorial parlor.

On the other side of this equation though, have you ever met someone who has a true and abiding zeal for something?

A while back we had an intern working for us here in the youth ministry department, and before he got into ministry he was working as a barista. Not like, a summer gig to earn extra cash. He legitimately, passionately, and zealously loved all things coffee. He loved making coffee. He loved drinking coffee. He loved talking about coffee with others. He loved sharing different drink ideas with others. (It's really hard to see why we might have hired him!) All you had to do was bring up coffee, and he was gone down the rabbit hole. He loved it. He was zealous for it.

What issues that help to serve the Lord are we most zealous for? Maybe for you it's homelessness. You just can't stand that some people don't have a place to be safe at night, and so you want to serve the Lord by working on that. Maybe for you it's the loneliness epidemic going on in our culture. You want to reach out and make sure that everyone has someone to connect with. Maybe for you it's the mental health crisis that's gripped our world. You want the church to invest some time into being a resource for helping folks to heal. For a lot of us, it's been the Haitian refugee community in Charleroi. We want to spend as much time down there making folks feel welcome in Christ as we can.

Or maybe you're feeling a twinge of guilt right now because you don't have something to be zealous for yet. That's very ok. Some people don't find that zeal for serving the Lord in a particular way until late in life. My encouragement to you though is to put yourself out there in as many situations as you can until you find it. Find the person who is zealous about homelessness, or loneliness, or mental health, or refugees, and see what drives them. Because one thing is true, usually truly zealous people are contagious. They have a habit of sharing their zeal with others.

Associate with the lowly.

When I was a teenager, one of the lessons that we were taught again and again (and again and again) was that we shouldn't fall in with the wrong crowd. The people you associate with are the ones who are going to give you a reputation, so if you associate with the right people, you get a good reputation. They'll inspire you to do better things, they'll create a culture of kindness, they'll keep you out of trouble. But, if you

associate with the wrong crowd, you get quite a different reputation, don't you? They'll inspire you into bad behavior, they'll create a culture of cynicism, they'll actively get you into trouble.

I think we all got that advice, and followed it pretty closely, because as best as I can tell most of us like to hang out with and try to associate with popular and influential people. We try so hard to work our way up the social ladder and spend as much time as we can rubbing elbows with the in-crowd. Because maybe if we spend our time with the success stories, people will assume that we associate with the success stories, and then people will assume that we're successful. And listen, I would be every bit as guilty as anybody in here of following that formula.

The problem is that it is not the formula that either Paul or Jesus are advocating. Paul says that we should not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly. We shouldn't try to grab the best seat at the table of life. We shouldn't try to claim to be wiser than we are. We shouldn't associate with success just for the sake of looking successful. Instead, we should work to actively associate with the lowly, the leftist, the burnout, and the undesirables in this life. Can you imagine the reputation we would get if we did that? Maybe folks would start to say we were gluttons and drunkards, that we were friends to tax collectors and sinners. Just like folks were saying about Jesus.

In fact, this is something Father Boyle picks up on in his book as well: "Serving others is good. It's a start. But it's just the hallway that leads to the Grand Ballroom. Kinship—not

serving the other, but being with the other. Jesus was not “a man for others”; he was one *with* them.”²

That is what Paul is calling us to do here. Can we be *with* the lowly, so much so that we start to get a reputation of associating with them?

One more highlight, but please do read the rest on your own!

So far as it depends on you.

I’ve mentioned that I’m coaching the boys’ hockey team, and Thursday night was the first game of the playoffs. In addition to Joshua, who is a pretty experienced goaltender at this point, we have a young girl who is brand new to the position. This is her first year. And, as is often the case with 8 year olds, she can be easily distracted.

So before the game on Thursday, I pulled her aside after the team speech, and looked right into her eyes and said “I don’t want you to worry about the scoreboard, I don’t want you to worry about the refs, I don’t want you to worry about who left the bench door open, and I don’t want you to worry what color that bird is.” (All things that she had worried about in previous games).

I said “I want you to worry about one thing and one thing only: Keep the ball out of the net.” Three times I asked “You with me?” Three times she answered “Yep. Keep the ball out of the net.”

² *Tattoos on the Heart*, page 188

So you can imagine my worry when about five minutes into the first period she starts yelling toward me that we have a problem. I run over during a break and say “What’s the matter?” And she says “The other coach left his sunglasses on top of my net.”

Sigh.

But truth be told, as a coach I don’t think I have taught them so much how to play hockey as I have taught them, or tried to teach them how to focus on what they can control. You cannot control the refs. Play your game. You cannot control the other team and how they’re playing. Play your game. You cannot control who leaves their sunglasses on top of the net. Play your game.

Paul says “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” And oh boy, do we ever like to focus on literally everything except what depends on us. “I can’t live peaceably! Those jerks in the other political party are playing dirty!” “I can’t live peaceably, the economy is too busted!” “I can’t live peaceably, people keep leaving their sunglasses on my net!” “I can’t live peaceably, the world is actively against me!”

Yeah. It is.

But all Paul is encouraging us to do is to focus on what we can control, play our game, and to advocate for peace. Maybe you can’t do anything about the political divide in our country, except you can by committing yourself to civil dialogue with those who disagree with you. Maybe you can’t do anything about the economy, except you can by being as generous as

possible with whatever resources you do have. Maybe you can't do anything about how hateful the world has become, except you can by being as kind and loving toward strangers you come in contact with. (Paul would actually say that's not enough, we ought to love our enemies to the point of caring for their needs. That's in our control too.) Maybe you can't do anything about the sunglasses on top of the net, but that's ok. Just focus on what's in front of you. Maybe you can't do anything about anyone else, but so far as it depends on you, love without the mask on.

Blessing

And so, may you let love be genuine and spoken freely. May you always come to find that E means enough, and F means full. May you share that news with others. May you not lag in zeal, but drive toward what God is calling you to. May you associate with the lowly enough to get a reputation. And may you, so far as it depends on you, love without a mask on.



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