

“Unveiled Faces”

Do you remember the first game you learned as a child? Minister and author John Ortberg says he does – it was “peek-a-boo”. He says it is such an easy game with only two parts. First you peek and then you boo! Being a first time grandmother, I have played peek-a-boo for long periods of time with Hayden and he and I both find it just fascinating. Or at least I think he does.

But when we get older, we give up the game. I mean, have you ever had someone call you up and say, “Can you and Jim come over for dinner and a game of peek-a-boo this Friday night?” Or how about you young people – ever talk about going to a friend’s house for peek-a-boo after the football game?

Psychologists think this is an important developmental game because it helps us learn that people will still be there for us, even when we cannot see them. An important theological truth about our God as well. So perhaps after a certain age, we don’t *need* to practice knowing that whoever has hidden themselves from us will still be there when we peek. Maybe we outgrow peek-a-boo because we grow in faith.

But I wonder if we quit playing the game because, as we age, we don’t really like the boo part. We are reluctant to show our faces and let people see who we really are, how we really feel or what we may be thinking. Who wants to show acne or wrinkles or tears or sweat?

I thought of all of this game playing and what it really means as I read Jesus’ first sermon, according to the Gospel of Luke. Luke is the most chronologically correct of the all the Gospels. In his version of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, he tells us that, after his miraculous

conception and birth in a barn, Jesus is dedicated at the Temple at the age of twelve like all good Jewish boys of his day. Luke completely skips over his rebellious teenage years so those of us raising or working with children have no idea what to do with them between 12 and 30. But after being baptized and tempted by the devil Jesus began his ministry with the words that we just heard.

Scholars call this Jesus' "programmatic sermon" meaning these words are what Jesus is all about. And I think his words encourage us to go back to our childhood game and be willing to show our true selves – our unveiled faces, if you will. Jesus chose to preach on words from the prophet Isaiah and he basically says, "I am here to hang out with the poor and the prisoners and the blind and the oppressed and the neediest characters that you know."

This was good news for the oppressed nation of Israel who had lived as captives under the authority of the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. Even in the land that God had given to their father Abraham, they were never really free.

It was good news for women and children who had no status of their own and were basically considered no more than property. It was good news to the lepers, the mentally ill, the physically disfigured and anyone who was different. In Biblical times, any condition that caused one to be less than whole was considered to be a punishment for some sin in their lives or the lives of their people. Having been ostracized for their sinfulness and shortcomings, Jesus' plan would be a welcome change.

It was also good news for the majority of Jews who were marginalized by society. The economy in Jesus' day consisted of three basic segments. Agriculture of olives, figs, grains,

dates, and vineyards; trade fostered by Israel's key location on the Mediterranean Sea; and large government building projects sponsored by King Herod.

And unfortunately, then as now, those who produced the crops and worked along the travelways were the least prominent people – struggling to make an honest living and feed their families. While the minority made up of scholars, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, government officials and the like, lived more luxurious lifestyles. When Jesus announced that he had come for the poor, he was talking to a large number of his own people whose lives depended on the strength of the crops, the amount of trade and the laws made by the rich and powerful.

But what do these words mean to us? I would venture a guess that most of us in this sanctuary don't know what it is like to *really* be hungry or have not had to spend the night in a shelter or haven't had to tie cardboard onto the bottoms of old shoes because we could not afford new ones. So it would be easy to think these words are not for us. OR even worse, Jesus' sermon might just make so uncomfortable that we simply do not want to listen.

But maybe Jesus is speaking to a different level of poverty and oppression, one that WE have ALL experienced at one time or another. Perhaps Jesus is preaching to the face behind the veil. The true selves that we are not comfortable showing others – even our brothers and sisters in Christ. You see, I believe Jesus' words are THE GOOD NEWS for you and me because he basically says that he came to love us all, even or maybe especially, the real you and the real me, the one behind the hands.

And because Jesus loves even the person that we are afraid to show to others, that means that when we come together as the Body of Christ in this place we can be completely ourselves, completely open, not hiding our faces behind the veil. Or can we?

Well truth be told, somehow or another in our 21st century churches, people have gotten the idea that church is for the good and shiny and perfect people. When we get to church, many of us feel so pressured to have it all together that, even when our worlds are falling apart, we will drive the SUV up to the church parking lot, tuck in our shirts and straighten our scarves, make sure the children are all spit shined in their Sunday bests, put on our happy faces and go smiling into the church. After all, we are there to show the rest of our friends that we are just as perfect as the next guy and God will smile **too** because everyone has a wife who vacuums in her pearls, three children and a black lab and anything less is unacceptable. And I just have to ask if that is the kind of church that WE want to be? Or want to worship in?

Because friends, I don't know where we got THAT church or THAT God. It is certainly not the God of Luke 4. Luke's Jesus spoke an important truth. That he came to seek and to save the lost, the troubled, the grieving, the confused. Just as God sought out Adam and Eve AFTER they decided to hide the shame of their sin, Jesus seeks us in our most scandalous state.

Of course Jesus' hope is that we will all live lives that are free and whole and content. But his promise to us is that when we can come into the presence of God and into our church homes where God surely awaits us, we will feel welcome no matter what we look like or what we are experiencing.

And because Jesus is present with us by the power of the Holy Spirit, we know that the church OF ALL PLACES is where we can experience acceptance, where we can find fulfillment, where we can be restored, where we are truly free from judgment and unrealistic expectations. In fact, I don't even think the Jesus of Luke 4 would bother to visit our churches if he really believed the pews would be filled with a bunch of men and women who look like Richard Gere

and Sandra Bullock and who have perfect families and no need to find relief or experience change.

Since we are not that far removed from Christmas, I am sure that everyone here probably heard the traditional Christmas story several times in the immediate past. Our Lord's only son born to earthly parents, a young carpenter and his unwed teenaged wife. Born in a stable surrounded by smelly animals with only shepherds to greet him. THAT picture of Christmas is the one we are most familiar with and therefore brings us the most comfort.

My favorite birth narrative however, is found in the Gospel of John. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." The reason I love this version of Jesus' birth is because, while Luke places Jesus in the manger, John places him in the world, where we need him most. And the Greek word "dwelt" would be better translated as "pitched a tent." *And the Word was made flesh and pitched a tent among us.*

Our God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, came into the very mud of our existence, rolled up his sleeves, and wallowed in our disagreements, our disillusionment, our despair. He didn't come to live among the righteous, the perfect, the whole. Instead he dwelt among poor, the needy, the sinners, the most unrighteous. And in his death on the cross, the death of a common criminal, the Messiah clothed us with the grace of being made perfect in a way that we can never achieve by our own merit.

There is one more important thing that Jesus' first sermon tells us. That if you and I are going to call ourselves his disciples, then we are to be about the same ministry that he is. What that means is that Jesus' so called programmatic sermon is to be our programmatic sermon too. Our words, our actions, our prayers are to be about setting the oppressed free, bringing relief to the poor, and showing one another that we are loved no matter what our faces are like when we

remove the veil. God didn't come because we were perfect. God came to love us because, in our imperfection, we needed that love more. And we are called to show that love and grace even here, in the church of the imperfect people.

One of my favorite stories is told by author Sue Monk Kidd who used to live in Anderson, South Carolina when her husband was chaplain of the college there. She had taken her son to a local carnival and they were standing in line, waiting to have Tiger Paws painted on their faces. The girl in front of them was red haired and freckle faced and was there with her grandmother.

Another boy walked by and saw her and said, "You have so many freckles, there is no place to paint on your face." Sue said the little girl's shoulders sagged and her head bowed and she looked at her shoes to hide her tears. Her grandmother squatted down and looked up into her eyes and said, "I LOVE freckles." The little girl answered with, "I don't, I HATE them." But her grandmother insisted, "Well I think freckles are beautiful," as she traced her finger lovingly across her cheek.

Feeling just a little bit hopeful the girl said, "You do?" "Why yes," came the reply. "You just name me one thing in the world more beautiful than freckles." And the girl looked into the eyes of her beloved grandmother and said simply, "Wrinkles."

God calls us to love one another as Jesus did – wrinkles, freckles and all. He calls us boldly to remove our hands, the veil in front of our real selves, so that we can love one another as we are, each beautiful child created in the image of God. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.