

Ash Wednesday
February 21, 2007
Sermon by Rev Timothy A Leitzke

Hypocrites get such grief in the Bible! It's really unfair to them. The very word 'hypocrite', in English, means one who says things that one does not mean. That's totally unfair to hypocrites. 'Hypocrite' was the Greek word for actor. I've been an amateur actor, and while some of my cast mates' performances might have seemed worthy of the wrath of God, all in all it's not a profession worth this kind of grief. An actor has to become the person being portrayed. To play the Major General in a youth performance of *The Pirates of Penzance* I studied how officers in Victorian England behaved. I was dressed in white trousers, big black boots, and the famous red coat. The makeup crew coated me in heavy foundation and penciled in wrinkles. They slicked back my hair and whitened it with gel and gave me a fake white beard (I was only 15). I was changed almost beyond recognition. In Greco-Roman theatre the hypocrites skipped the makeup and donned masks with exaggerated features to indicate their character. The actor was there but rendered unrecognizable.

Sometimes an actor becomes so associated with a character that we think he *is* the character. *Seinfeld* fans see Jason Alexander and immediately think: George Costanza. Jason Alexander is an actor, but we recognize him as George. He was so good at being George that it's hard to see him and not think of George. Jason Alexander was there the whole time, but he was rendered unrecognizable. That was the whole point. Being an actor—being a hypocrite in the Greco-Roman

sense—is not in and of itself bad. You’re playing a role in a dramatic presentation. The evil in being a hypocrite comes when you are hypocritical off stage, when you deceive yourself and those around you into thinking that you are someone else.

All of us are tempted to do it. A lot of us are really good at acting like someone else. We’ve all been there, trying to live up to our parents’ expectations or struggling to fill a role that clearly was cut for someone else. We want to be recognized as someone cool or someone successful, but we chase after other people’s dreams. We study how others have pulled it off. We match their dress, their haircut, their speech. We deceive ourselves and we deceive those around us, and people think we’re really someone else. People like us. We become highly regarded or highly paid. Everyone models their lives after ours, but none of them really know us. We’re miserably alone, because everyone around us is relating to the character we’re playing, and not relating to us.

This is what St Matthew is talking about when he writes: “And when you fast, do not become as the hypocrites—sullen faced—for they render their faces unrecognizable in order that they might be recognized by people as fasting.” What kind of insanity is that? We want to be recognized so we make ourselves unrecognizable! We play a part, hoping to look better that way, but we stop being ourselves and no one else can recognize us.

I think of teenage girls struggling to be the most attractive and the most popular. They paint themselves and dress alike and do whatever the crowd is doing and try so desperately to fit in that they look like other people. The girl you

know and love is there, but she's made herself unrecognizable. I think of college frat boys who want in on the fun so they plow into binge drinking and objectifying women and dressing alike and talking alike so much that you no longer recognize the guys you met at freshman orientation. The guy you know and love is there, but he's rendered himself unrecognizable.

I think of so many of us struggling to forge a life with a job that requires more time and energy than we have and a house that requires constant upkeep and the expectation of attendance at social functions and the kids are in three different schools and one plays soccer and the other football and the other baseball and we have to come to Church as a family but my husband sleeps in on Sundays and my wife just sits in her chair and the kids work and I have to have my suits cleaned and get a new luxury SUV and nobody can tell who we are anymore because we've rendered ourselves unrecognizable. Sin has rendered us unrecognizable.

We are no longer ourselves, and Sin is lurking within us. The hypocrites of Matthew's gospel have become other people. They did it to look pious, to fit their society's religious expectations. Inside their pitiable shapes lurks Sin, because we see that show of piety and want to be like they are, only they're hollow. We see them making out big checks at press conferences or praying on television or wailing at the sight of a crucifix and we want to emulate that show of piety and listen to them, but they're not doing any good. Following them will make us unrecognizable. Sin has deformed them, and now it lies within them, waiting to devour us.

Friends of Christ, God calls us through the gospel to be the people God created us to be. God doesn't want us to disfigure ourselves. God wants us to embrace the identity that God has given to us. God is at work in this world, and not by making people unrecognizable. God is present, largely in secret. Injustice disfigures people. God is present when we loose the bonds of injustice. Oppression disfigures people. God is present when we set people free. Hunger and starvation disfigure a person. God is present when we share our bread with the hungry. Homelessness and poverty disfigure a person. God is present when we bring the homeless and poor into our own care. Fights and squabbles disfigure people. God is present when we do not hide from each other but work for reconciliation. This is the Lenten discipline to which God calls us. It's honest. We embrace who we are and work to help our brothers and sisters be more fully human. God is present largely in secret, making us more fully ourselves.

Today is Ash Wednesday, a day when we put a big black cross on our foreheads. We're not doing this for show. We're doing this to remind us of who we are. Those marks are made of ashes. Those ashes used to be living palm leaves; they're dead, now. We wear them in the dead center of our faces to remind *us* that we're already dead. That's a reality check for us; we are *not* the people we pretend to be. Underneath our costumes we are dead. Those ashes make a cross, and the cross is a symbol of Jesus the Christ's life, death, and resurrection. That cross reminds us, "We have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us." We are dead to Sin and we are alive for Christ. We are *not*

the people we pretend to be; underneath our costumes we are Children of God. God recognizes us, and God loves us, and God wants us to be who God created us to be.

In this season of Lent we deny ourselves some of those things that can distract us from God. What do we do that turns us into someone other than who we really are? It's time to let go of it, and let God turn us back towards God. When you go home tonight and wash off that cross, wash off your mask, throw away your costume. Throw off the makeup and the conforming dress and the groupthink and all the things that make you someone else. God doesn't love that imaginary person. God loves you. It's time to stop worrying about what the other girls think or what the other boys do or how you stack up against other people. God liberates us from all of that. This Lent, let God break you out of that mess. The people God knows and loves are here. Let God make you recognizable. Amen