

Glittering Images: Week 2: Romans 3: 21-28 August 9, 2015

Read NIV translation first.

I want to start with a recap of last week. For those of you who were here, it will be a review. For those who weren't here last week, it's a way to catch you up to where we are. We are in a sermon series called Glittering Images, where we are examining Paul's letter to the Romans and its connection to the masks we wear today, two millenniums later.

Last Sunday I talked about our all having glittering images- the smiling face we put on when we come to church so that we are accepted and validated as "safe and nice", and how, over time, this can block the transformation that can happen when our masks are off and we worship with humility and openness to change (John 4:23and 24).

We are taught from a young age to keep the dark parts of ourselves hidden away, and gradually we begin to live a life that is not authentic. We also start to tell ourselves lies. "You are stupid and ugly, so don't talk out loud or ever be seen without make up and

being all dressed up.” or maybe “No one wants to know about how depressed you are so just smile. If it ain’t positive, people won’t listen.” Sometimes we believe the lies we’ve been told by an abusive or alcoholic parent. But mostly I think most of us are deceived by our own false ideas.

I said that the church has an obligation to create a safe space where our full authentic selves are welcome. We need to wrestle honestly with issues of integrity, brokenness, and redemption. And I invited us to set aside our glittering images to allow God’s love to transform us

1) Admit we have a problem of putting more energy into projecting a non-wounded image even though our personalities develop most powerfully around the areas of our soul’s greatest wounding. We need to change our church culture into one where we say: “It’s OK to not be OK!”

2) We have to be willing to be corrected so we have a kin-dom mentality here in this place of community grace.

3) I suggested that we need ways of keeping each other honest. Maybe it's a spiritual director, a small discernment group where it's safe to drop the mask, or an Al-anon or recovery group to keep our souls cleaned and unclogged with the blockage of denial and falseness. We need to work diligently to make this place a church for saved sinners instead of shielded saints. Ours is a journey of grace, not a destination of black and white/either/or driven-ness.

When we do these things, we have the chance “to stop *covering up* and start *growing up* in Christ”. (These words are Marty Troyer's, who preached this series on Romans in his Texas church last year.)

In Pauls' time, Christianity was a brand new religion. The new synagogue contained both Jews *and* Greeks, not just Jews as before. This was a huge switch and so Paul is explaining to believers in Rome what faith in Christ means and how the law and the prophets were foretelling Jesus. Now, the gospel—what he gave his life for---was open to *anyone* who believed and declared

themselves to be sinners, forgiven by God. Now, instead of being saved by obeying all the purity rules of cleanness and uncleanness, it was a matter of confessing that the justice of God comes through faith.

Justification, as explained by Paul, then means the forgiveness of sins and the gift of righteousness-through trusting that God has your back (faith), not by the rules you do or don't keep (works). Paul explains that because we are forgiven, we are right with God or right-eous!

There's a face that we hide til the nighttime appears,

And what's hiding inside, behind all our fears,

Is our true self, locked inside the façade! ~from the musical Jekyll and Hyde

What are you trying to cover up with your mask? If you say nothing, then ask yourself this question: Why wear a mask at all?

1. I cannot let my dark side show. I would be rejected or laughed at. I would need to hide. If they knew this about me, they wouldn't like me, they wouldn't accept me, or they would turn from me.

2. I wear my mask because it is expected. It is social etiquette to wear a mask. There isn't a problem, is there? Everyone does it.

But Rick Warren, who recently lost a son to suicide, says that "wearing a mask wears you out. Faking it is fatiguing. The most exhausting activity is pretending to be what you know you aren't." And I would add that often we have this attitude because we are also hiding a portion of our lives from God!

3. I wear my mask to protect myself from being vulnerable. And this is needed and it is good, but growth and transformation are built on our capacity for authenticity, not defense.

When I was studying music education at Ashland University, we were required to give a senior recital. I'll never forget the girl-I'll call her Mary- who, three weeks before her recital, manufactured a grave illness to prohibit her from having to sing on stage. All her hard work was waste because of her performance phobia. Her room was full of floral arrangements, flowers she said were from

relatives, sympathizing with her in her sudden and severe illness. It was painfully obvious that Mary did not want to give this recital and could only go home by manufacturing the mask of illness to cover her fear of failure. What she got was pity, but not the kind that comes from a physical illness. Mary's pain and deception was far deeper because it forced her deeper and deeper into cover up and more and more lies. Mary was in a desperate pursuit of a sense of self.

If you are a person who lacks an identity, a sense of self, then only a relationship with the divine will give you an anchor, something to count on. Jesus will help you differentiate between your mask and your true self. The Spirit of Christ will help you to tell the truth about yourself, not continue to lie and block the truth.

Now we get to some very difficult questions about our faith. If we believe the teaching that Jesus was born to die, that God had to allow Jesus to die to appease the Evil forces or to pay the price for all of humanity's sinfulness, then a loving God just does not make

sense! And it shouldn't! We are saying that God was behind the whole crucifixion plot and on the same side as the Romans who killed our Savior! On the contrary, I believe doing justice does not mean to punish. Instead, I believe in a God that focuses on Jesu' life as the reign of God rather than on Jesus' death as an act of God. Salvation, in this way of belief, images God NOT as a God who abuses the perfect Son for the benefit of others, but rather a God who suffers WITH Jesus in making the reign of God visible in the world.¹

I believe that the justice of God is love- love, not retribution!

The God I serve is not a God of violent retribution. God's sense of justice does not demand eternal punishment just for being human, a kind of god demanding divine child abuse as the price of your freedom. The myth of a violent god, when we believe it, keeps us immobilized and protective of our facades. And it is not good news.

¹ J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, page 226.

Fundamentalism would have us believe in this cruel god who expects his son to die as a criminal of Rome just so we don't have to suffer for our sins. This has never made sense to me!

God's justice and peace are on display all around us, but we're blinded by false gods and systems that exploit our sinfulness. All seems lost....until we look to Jesus. And when I look at Jesus and see how sinners weren't punished out of their sin, but instead LOVED out of their sin, then my image of God becomes one of a just God of love, not a violent God of punishment. Romans 3:21 says that in him, the righteousness of God has been disclosed. Jesus breaks the stranglehold worldview of "power over" (in the language of Greg Boyd) and instead Jesus reignites our imagination with his shining example of defeating the principalities and systems of worldly power and violence with a new way, the way of compassion and love. In Jesus, we see someone forgiving as we forgive and standing on the front porch

watching for our return from a long and fruitless journey. Jesus never suggests that God has a score to settle with us.

Am I saying that we can do whatever we choose and never suffer any consequences? No. There are always real life consequences to our sin problem and we do need a savior. We still need to repent, in our complicity to the empire as well in our individual choices to live selfishly, but when we see the light of the life of Christ and repent of our selfish sin, we are awed by his life, death, and resurrection, we repent and we are forgiven.

We still live in an empire of violence and greed and deceit. But through our belief in Jesus and the example of his life, we are able to turn and walk in newness of life. We are freed to make peace through peace not violence.

The justice of God is Love.

May God help us to love each other and others into this kind of justice. Amen.