

Ash Wednesday February 17, 2021

Jesus made it clear that He came for sinners, to free them from their sins and lead them back to God. In fact, while He walked the earth, He surrounded Himself with all types of sinners and urged people to be forgiving and merciful to each other.

There was one type of sinner, however, that Jesus was quick to criticize - the hypocrites. The word “hypocrite” comes from the Greek word for “actor”. It is fitting because hypocrites are not being themselves but acting out a role. Because they are not authentic and are out of touch with their real selves, they cannot see themselves as they really are. They are in denial about their sinfulness and cannot see their need for God. In an attempt to draw attention away from their own sinfulness, they are quick to point out the flaws in others. They are wearing a mask and will do anything necessary to keep their mask from being taken off.

If we were to be honest with ourselves, we'd have to admit that all of us are hypocrites to one extent or another. All of us are busy playing a role and wearing a mask. Some of us want to portray ourselves as being confident and self-assured. All the while, we are hiding how insecure and out-of-control we really feel. Some of us want others to think that we are wealthy and successful. That is because, inside, we feel poor and incompetent. Some of us wear a mask of piety and holiness. We want others to believe that we are prayerful and virtuous people. We do that to hide the fact that we are struggling with sinful habits and with doubts. All of us are wearing a mask of one sort or another to hide from people the parts of ourselves that we judge are unacceptable and unworthy of love.

We might be able to fool one another, but we cannot fool God. He sees through our play acting and the elaborate masks we wear. He sees our heart. He sees the parts of us that we reject, that parts that we judge are unacceptable and unworthy of love. And, He loves us anyway. We don't have to hide from God. No matter what the state our soul may be in, we can come to Him with confidence knowing that He will never reject us.

In today's gospel, Jesus talks about the “inner room” where we go to pray. That “inner room” is a place where we can take off our mask, put away our script, and interact with God in an authentic and honest way. In that inner room of prayer, we can pour out our hearts to Him, tell Him how we really feel, tell Him what we honestly think, and unburden ourselves of the weight of shame we are carrying. Jesus is inviting us to literally “bare our souls” to our Heavenly Father.

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If that is something we have never had the courage to do, this season of Lent is the time to start. It is as simple as finding a quiet place somewhere where no one can see or hear us, and speaking to God whatever is on our heart with the confidence that He hears, that He cares about us, and that He will love us no matter what.

Every year on Ash Wednesday, we make a dramatic gesture that is unlike anything else we do at Mass. We mark our faces with ashes. What we are doing is crossing out the masks that we wear. We are saying that there is more to us than the roles we play. There is more to us than we are showing. By placing ashes on our faces, we are saying that we will die one day. We came from ashes and we are returning to ashes. We are not immortal. We are not invincible. Our lives are short and most of us will be forgotten shortly after we die. We are also proclaiming to the world that we are sinners in need of repentance. For all our efforts to follow Jesus and to lead a good life, we have fallen short. We are taking off our masks of independence, of self-assuredness, of perfection and telling the world that we need to change. Ash Wednesday is an invitation to us to stop playing a role and to stand before God as we really are - sinners who will one day die and who are in need of the forgiveness and the eternal life that only God can give us.

That is why we are called to fast today. When we go without food, we are reminding ourselves that the deepest desires of our hearts cannot be found in this world or in the pleasures that it provides. The hunger that we feel in our body reveals to us the hunger that we feel in our soul for friendship with God. Fasting during lent un.masks all the ways we try to fill ourselves up with things that can never really satisfy us. Even while it weakens our body, fasting strengthens our soul to face up to ourselves as we really are and turn to Jesus for the help we need.

Another way that we can discover our authentic selves during Lent is by sharing what we have with the poor. Traditionally, Christians have taken the money they have saved by eating less and sacrificing more and shared it with the needy. We traditionally do this through the CRS Rice Bowl Campaign. This practice reminds us that the things of this world are passing away. It is a way of unmasking all the ways that we put our security and hope in material things. Being generous with the poor reminds us that we have a responsibility to love our neighbors and to serve them in their needs.

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This Ash Wednesday is an invitation to stop being hypocrites, to take off the masks we've been wearing, and to stop making believe we are something we are not. Chances are, we are not fooling anyone anyway, and we certainly are not fooling God. As we receive ashes today, let us ask God to give us the courage to dissolve our fake, insincere self and discover the true self He created us to be. Then He can begin to heal and transform us as we make our journey to the celebration of Easter.