

Brilliant Disguises

2 April 2006

Bible passage: **Matthew 7:15-16** (TEV)

“Be on your guard against false prophets; they come to you looking like sheep on the outside, but on the inside they are really like wild wolves. You will know them by what they do. Thorn bushes do not bear grapes, and briars do not bear figs.”

Did you hear about the two well bred dogs that were walking daintily down the street with their noses held high in the air? Along came an alley dog of the Heinz 57 variety. The first two dogs were embarrassed to be seen in the company of such a commoner, so one of them said to the other, “We must go. By the way, my name is Miji, spelling M-I-j-i.” The other pure-bred said, “My name is Miki, spelled, M-I-K-I.” As they were turning to leave, the third dog, the common alley variety, called after them, “My name is FIDO—spelling P-H-Y-D-E-A-U.” Oh, the games we play and the pretenses under which we often live.

Isn't it interesting how many ways we've found to pretend to be someone or something we're not? We act as though we've got it all together—that we're competent and confident. All the while, we feel like a little child who's scared to death of making a mistake, of being fired, of being embarrassed by all that we don't know.

Often it's a matter of wanting to look good, and to be seen in a favorable light. We like to be regarded as the ideal worker, a perfect parent, a virtuous person, and the model spouse. We may try to give the impression that we're a perfect person with a storybook kind of life, but let me tell you—I've been around long enough to know that no such thing exists. Probably the closest we ever come to perfection is in writing our resume.

Sometimes we possess all the trappings that cause others to think that we've got it made. We give the impression by the car we drive or the house in which we live that we're wealthy and successful, and because of such fortune, we haven't a care in the world. We like to look good, and we sometimes thrive on impressing others. We “put on airs,” pretending to be something we're not. We do that when we try so hard to live up to the expectations of our parents or our friends or our neighbors.

I suppose there are times when we may do the exact opposite. Sometimes we want folks to think that we're mean, ferocious people, who would just as soon bite their heads off as to talk with them. We come across as the bully, the big shot, and we may revel in making others afraid of us.

Isn't that the essence of the Wizard of Oz? The Wizard was hiding behind the curtain as his brilliant disguise,

making a lot of noise, being a frightening presence. However, when the curtain was torn away, there was a meek little man who was cowering away in fear.

That may be a part of what our Bible passage for today is talking about. Jesus is speaking, and our version goes like this: “**Be on your guard against false prophets; they come to you looking like sheep on the outside, but on the inside they are really like wild wolves. You will know them by what they do. Thorn bushes do not bear grapes, and briars do not bear figs.**”

Jesus is warning his listeners not to be taken in by those who look or act like prophets, because they just may not be the real thing. This was a fairly common problem in his day, and he wanted folks to know that what they were seeing or hearing may not be authentic.

People should not be fooled by how someone appears, but rather by what they do. He uses the analogies of a wolf disguised as a sheep and the tree that produces worthless fruit. The reality is that a person's true nature will be revealed in how they live and what they do, not in what they merely claim or pretend to be. He is urging us to see through the disguises.

A model who was at the height of her career sort of illustrates what Jesus meant. She was much sought after, and all of her business connections spent a lot of time telling her just how beautiful she was. They told her so often that she began to believe them. After all, she was part of a business that celebrates a person solely for her looks—only for external beauty.

Her career came to a screeching halt when a drunk driver struck the taxi in which she was riding after the driver ran a red light. She went through the glass partition dividing the passengers from the driver, and suffered severe facial and head injuries. The doctor, finding out that she was a well-recognized model, assured her that they would be able to make sure she had a complete recovery, with no scarring.

However, that was the point at which she began to learn that all that is important is not the outside. She discovered that external beauty is really only skin deep, and that kind of beauty can be extremely deceiving. She said, “I looked at the pictures and I saw a woman I no longer wanted to be....You know what? I think I became beautiful *after* the accident. I became kinder, more aware. I gained respect for other people.”

I thought it took courage for her to write such an article, because she was really going against the grain of so much of our society. All too often, we only look at the

superficial aspects of a person, and never really try to understand what the heart and soul of that person is like.

And, frankly, many of us spend a lot of time and energy trying to hide our real selves from the world. We may do it so well that we hide our real selves from ourselves!

Theologian Frederick Buechner talks about our tendency to play it safe, hiding who we really are, and trying to be what others seem to want of us. He wrote: "This is the story of all our lives...and in the process of living out that story, our original shimmering self gets buried so deep that most of us end up hardly living out of it at all. Instead we live out all the other selves which we are constantly putting on and taking off like coats and hats against the world's weather."

Buechner continued, "If we continue, we run the risk of losing track of who we truly and fully are and little by little come to accept instead the highly edited version which we put forth in hope that the world will find it more acceptable than the real thing."

It's a scary thing to think about dropping our disguises and letting the real "me" the real "you" out. It's especially hard because we all wear those masks; pretending is an art that is almost second nature to many of us. We talk about trivial, inconsequential things, never daring to risk being honest about our hopes and dreams and thoughts. We may give the impressions that we're sure of ourselves, that we're calm, cool and collected, and yet we may be paddling like mad under the surface. Most of us are afraid that deep down, on the inside, we are nothing, and we're afraid that you'll find out, and turn your back on us, leaving us alone and abandoned.

What's the answer to this dilemma? How can we risk being who we really are? How do we allow ourselves to even try to discover who we are?

For me, it has everything to do with our connection with God, knowing that God made each one of us, and that God loves us and sees us as people of worth and value. We are each uniquely created; we are all different from one another and God loves us—fears, and shortcomings and failures and all.

Rachel Remen, in her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, tells about one of her patients, a history professor, who is one of identical twins. Even at the age of 35, they bear such a strong resemblance to one another that it often confuses their friends. He talked with Remen about his experience of being a twin, and the inability of others to know him from his brother, the constant struggle to be who he really was, to be his own person. He felt that

he was fated to be the mirror image of his brother, that he could never be his real self.

During one of their sessions, the professor walked over and picked up a pair of dice that another client had left with her. He shook them hard, and tossed them on the floor. The dice lay there on the rug, two perfectly identical cubes. One had come up a one and the other a six. Remen said that they both stared at them in silence for a moment, and then they began to laugh. Even in likeness, there is uniqueness.

God made it that way, and God intends for us to discover our true selves and to let that real self shine through. God doesn't want us to cover up and try to hide our essence with disguises and pretenses, but rather wants us to let our real selves out.

Le Petit Prince has a line in it that says, "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." God wants us to allow that which is essential, that which is real, out for the world to see.

Margery Williams's story of the *Velveteen Rabbit* really says what I think being real is. The Velveteen Rabbit has come to the nursery and he's gotten to know the Skin Horse, who had lived longer there than any other toy. The Skin Horse was so old that his coat was bald in patches and the seams showed underneath. Most of the hairs in his tail had been pulled out, but he was the wisest toy, because he had seen many others come and go, with broken mainsprings and numerous other maladies. The Skin Horse had befriended the Velveteen Rabbit, and one day the rabbit asked, "What is REAL? Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

My friends, God loves us, and God has loved us for a long, long time. Being loved by God is what makes us real, and when we're real, we can let our real selves shine!

Closing:

Ron Jensen, in his book *Make a Life, Not Just a Living*, talks about the importance of being real and authentic. He defines authenticity as "being the same on the inside as we are on the outside."

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that you and I are on the journey to be real, to be authentic, to be the same on the inside as we are on the outside.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.