

I recently heard a man tell about the time he was driving in the car with his daughter when they passed by the house where they lived until she was eight years old. He asked her, "Do you remember living in that house?" She said she did. So naturally her father asked, "What do you remember?" Her reply struck him as odd, yet somehow profound. She said, "I remember my third birthday party in the backyard and you had a clown come and we all cried, because the clown scared us." As they talked further the father realized that what scared his 3 year old daughter was that the kids could not tell who was behind the mask.

I had a similar experience when I was in the first grade. My mom came up with the brilliant idea that for Halloween, she would come to my school dressed up as a witch. And let me tell you, she went all out in the costume. She had the black dress, she had the mask, she had the black hair, she had the pointy hat. Something you need to know as well. I started elementary at the start of school integration in South Carolina. So this was in the early years of the experiment that white kids and black kids could study together in a safe and productive school environment.

Well my mom got into her part a little too well. The kids in my class shrunk down into spaces under their desks as this deranged white woman hopped around the class with a blood curdling laugh. The only thing that kept me from having a panic attack was that I could see that the shoes this woman was wearing were my mom's shoes. My mom was a great mom who did a lot of great things for her kids.

But the idea to dress up as a wicked witch at the beginning of school segregation was not one of her greatest ideas. Wearing a mask and terrorizing young kids did not exactly breed a sense of trust that day.

Now, we may not wear masks like my mom wore that day, but we adults and youth do wear other kinds of masks every day. Depending on the occasion or circumstance we throw on a mask to fit whatever we think is our need that day. Now the masks we use are not like these masks that I have brought with me today.

Although occasionally we may put on a mask to have fun at Halloween or we may put on a mask in our work places. I'm not talking about those kids of masks. I'm talking about the kinds of masks we use to make ourselves appear one way when we are not what we make ourselves appear to be.

What are the kinds of masks that we wear today? I'm not sure what age it begins, but a lot of youth have gotten pretty good at wearing masks. And social networking sites like Facebook, texting, and instant messaging actually make it easier to wear masks. We use these types of technological resources to pretend to be someone we are not really. We take on personas that are not the real us. We try to pretend that we are the fantasy person that we think others want us to be.

Some of us have grown up in homes where we have been taught that we are to wear masks. Someone close to you abused you in some way and told you to not tell anyone about your little secret. Pretending that everything is ok. Or something has happened to you or your family that has made you ashamed and so you put on a mask and pretend that it never happened. Or something painful has happened to you and you have buried it deeply inside of you and you are wearing a mask that this action never ever happened to you.

And for many of us, because we wear our masks for so long, the mask starts becoming a part of our face. It becomes stuck to us and it becomes a part of who we are. So that the person who has been abused becomes distrustful of anyone around them. The person raised in a home where their parents fought all of the time behind the front door but then put on the appearance that their marriage was all flowers and roses learns that commitment in marriage is not real.

I recently read in Dear Abby, ok, so I read dear Abby. I read about a woman who was dating a very wealthy guy and she told him that he either needed to make a commitment to her or move on. He gave her a ring and proposed to her. When she went to get the ring sized to fit her finger, she discovered that the ring was not a real diamond and was actually pretty cheap. She was wondering if he was leading her on and wearing a mask that he really cared for her.

And, o my goodness, the best place to find people wearing masks is in church. We show up in worship pretending like everything is all great and wonderful in our homes and in our lives. How are you doing? Oh, I'm fine. You don't dare tell anyone that you screamed at your spouse or your kids all the way to worship this morning. You don't dare tell anyone that your business is about to go under. You don't tell anyone that you are struggling with an addiction.

You don't dare tell anyone that you have thoughts about harming yourself. We just all put on our masks and pretend like everything is wonderful.

And actually, we in the church encourage people to wear their masks. We are fearful of being honest with one another. We are fearful of being honest because we fear that if people saw who we really are and heard what we really struggled with that they would not like us. It is easier to just wear our masks and shoo people away with our attitudes so that they don't get too close to us.

But maybe something has happened to you recently which has caused the mask that you are wearing to tip to the side just a little bit allowing someone else to see that there is something beneath the mask. Maybe you were almost caught in the little secret that you have been keeping from other people in your life.

Maybe you've had an outburst which has caused you to finally come to the point when you are ready to say, "enough is enough." Maybe something has happened and you have had to say, "Ok, I'm ready to come clean. I'm ready to take off this mask and take a chance."

We have read two interesting stories this morning about wearing masks. In the first, we pick up the story of Moses and God after Moses had received the 10 Commandments on a mountain with God. Moses gets these Ten Commandments, returns to the people only to discover that they had given up on Moses and on God. Moses is angry and throws the stone tablets down causing them to break. Moses eventually returns to the mountain to get a copy of the originals.

When Moses descends this time from the mountain, his face is shining. And the people become scared that Moses' face is shining. So scared in fact that Moses has to put on a veil, a mask, to cover his face when he talks to them. But when Moses goes to speak to God, Moses removes the veil. Moses removes his mask in order to encounter God.

Paul in the portion of his letter that he writes to the Corinthians picks up on this theme. II Corinthians is a letter which is hard to read because it appears to not be very coordinated. In fact, many scholars assume that this letter is actually several letters that have been fused together. In the text we read, Paul refers to the Moses event and says that when we put masks on, we are preventing ourselves from experiencing the glory of Christ. Masks prevent us from truly connecting with God.

So it would seem that the role of the Christian community today is to help us to remove these masks that we work soooo hard to keep on. Remove these masks so that we can be honest with God about who we are. The Christian community should be a place where we encourage and support one another as we remove our masks.

Rather than cast dispersions or say, “wear your masks when we are around one another,” we should instead provide opportunities to be honest and real.

So how do we do that? I think one place we do this is in worship. In a little while we will ask for prayer concerns and celebrations, this can be a time when if we are struggling with something, we should be encouraged to say, “you know what, I need your prayers because I’m going through a difficult time right now. Finances are tight and we don’t know if we are going to make it. I just had a huge argument with my spouse. I just made a really dumb decision this week.”

I recently heard someone say that worship portrays what we value. Do we value our masks that prevent us from being honest with one another or do we value honesty and trust?

But some of us are not the type that will share in an open forum our hurts and pains. And that’s OK. Rather than accept that you are to continue wearing your masks, come and talk to me and lets figure out together a way for you to rip away your mask. Maybe for you God is calling you to create something that allows others to rip away their masks.

Maybe you are a person who likes to create things and God is tugging at you to begin a ministry that allows others like you to find a place where you can do some neat ministry together and break down some barriers. Maybe you are someone who is being tugged on by God to initiate some type of new ministry that encourages people to build relationships with one another rather than tear them down.

Life is too short and too precious to keep wearing masks. Masks are not who we really are. And God knows that. We have two stories where people removed masks and they were then able to really connect to God's glory.

Maybe it is time in your life to remove a mask or help someone else remove their mask.

Maybe it is time to let your real self come forward. You know, the one that you have been hiding behind your mask. AMEN.

-Opening illustration from "Your Full Potential" and found at

<http://www.yourfullpotential.org/wearingmasks.html>

-Texts: Exodus 34: 29-35; II Corinthians 3:12-4:2

-Given: February 14, 2010

Unison Prayer of Confession

We admit that we are often afraid to come near you, Glorious Creator. For if we do, you might see how our faces darken with anger as we speak hurtful words, or whiten with fear of those who are different, or redden from the depths of our desires. We can spend so much time gazing in the mirror of our longings, that we are unable to see the faces etched with loneliness, hollowed by hunger, overshadowed by hopelessness.

You reveal the mystery of your grace, Holy One, by pouring out mercy upon us. As you bend down to listen, may we speak your love to all around us. As you call us into your presence, you send us out to do your justice which brings hope to the world. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, our Savior, our Love, our Justice.

Silence is observed

Assurance of Pardon

On mountaintops and in valleys, in our hopes, and in our hearts, God knows us better than we know ourselves, and God forgives us when we cannot forgive ourselves!

By God's mercy, we are forgiven; by God's mercy, we are made whole; by God's mercy, we are equipped to serve others. Thanks be to God! Amen

Prayer of the Day

Rescuing God:

your wall of hope
surrounds us in our despair;
your haven of faith
welcomes us in our unbelief;
your citadel of love
protects us from our anger.

Gracious Word:

you reach out to those
we would dare not touch;
you greet those
we ignore on a daily basis;
you welcome those
we would close our hearts to.

Holy Spirit:

rest gently upon us,
so we might become kinder people;
caress us with your humility,
so we could let go of our pride;
show us your Way,
so we would not demand ours.

We hide deep in the closets of our hearts, but you O God, know our secret failings. We sit in the shadows of our lives, but you, O God, see the possibility we can become. We mumble our words, but you O God, bend down to listen. You whisper grace and hope to us. Give us the courage to remove our masks so that we can experience this grace most deeply.