

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Dr. William W. Rich

August 16, 2020

*XI Pentecost, Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28*

Glasses, wallet, keys. My old checklist for things I needed to have with me as I headed out into my day. But these days, when I leave home, I also check to see if I have my mask. In some ways, this checking for a mask seems like new behavior. Back before the pandemic, we didn't have to think about having a mask on board before we went out into the world. But from another perspective, we have all always been wearing masks, those personas we put on in order to present ourselves to the world.

And each of us wears a variety of masks, each one suited to the specific situation into which we go. I wear one persona – the commanding alpha persona – when I gather the dogs to take them to the neighborhood park for their walk. I wear another persona – the third child, but oldest male – persona during my weekly Zoom call with my two older sisters and my younger brother. And I take on yet another persona – priest – whenever I put on my collar to help lead worship, or to teach, or to listen to the outpourings of your souls.

You can think about masks as dangerous, hiding some truth. As in the old film noir movies, when the gangsters hid their identity, wearing a mask for the hold-up. Or you can think about them as displaying some reality, revealing some aspect of identity, not only to those who encounter the persona, but also to the one who puts on the persona.

When I was in high school, I made my stage debut in the bit role of Gramp Maple, in the Robert Sherwood play *The Petrified Forest*, a melodramatic tale of frustrated and spiritually empty lives in the Arizona desert during the Depression. Just after I learned I had been cast as Gramp, a good friend of mine surprised me. He said he would be afraid to try out acting, not because of stage fright, but because he feared taking on another persona would confuse him about who he really was. I remember replying that I saw it entirely differently. As a 17 year old, I felt I was discovering something about myself and the vulnerability of old age by trying on the persona of the heroine's grandfather.

Because he was fully human like us, Jesus himself had to undertake the journey of self-discovery to become his full Self. And as with us, Jesus' journey to full selfhood had its rough and confusing episodes. In today's story from St. Matthew's Gospel, we glimpse one of roughest moments of Jesus' struggle to become the Self God had called him to be.

But just as none of us would want to be defined solely by a single challenging moment in the unfolding of our identity, neither should we examine this difficult patch in Jesus' journey in isolation. Over the past few Sundays in preceding chapters of Matthew, we have had the chance to observe

Jesus' ongoing struggle to grow a sense of who he is as he proclaims and brings into being what he calls the Kingdom of God – or what I like to call “the way things are when God's way wins out.” In Chapter Thirteen we heard Jesus craft stories about God's surprises, the mysteries of God's ways. God's way in seeds that die and seeds that grow abundantly. God's way has a role for weeds amongst wheat. God's way is like a tiny mustard seed that grows up to provide a home for many. God's way is like a little yeast that causes transformative change in a lot of flour. God's way is like a treasure hidden in a field, like a pearl of precious value, with room for good and bad fish. What if each of these stories shows Jesus trying on a different persona? What if these are stories that Jesus tells himself as he tries to understand the ways of God, and tries to understand who he is, and what his role is supposed to be in the coming into being of God's kingdom? What if Jesus discovers various masks, personae, in these stories? Is Jesus asking: am I a seed that dies and a seed that grows abundantly? Am I to be a field that has room for both weeds and wheat? Am I to be a surprising home for many? Do I carry a hidden treasure, a precious pearl? Am I a sea with room for both good and bad fish? Do I carry a yeast within that can transform dead flour into living bread?

Many of us discover aspects of our identity – both pleasant and not so pleasant – in social settings, where our personae rub up against the identities of others, and where we learn something of who we are by discovering which other guests at a party we are most like, and which unlike. In two contrasting feasts in Matthew Chapter Fourteen, more of who Jesus is gets unmasked, and the shape of his identity, and its various masks, get revealed to us. In the first feast, we hear the story of Herod's birthday party – which we presume would provide abundant food and drink to the guests – but this feast ends up providing not an iota of lifegiving food. The persona at the center of this story is Herod, one of those who will later collude in the death of Jesus, and the only image of food mentioned in this story is the macabre one of the John the Baptist's head on a platter. Notice Jesus was not to be found at this feast. He was not invited and his unfolding persona would not have “found any room at the inn” there.

Instead, Jesus discovers something about himself at a different kind of party, this one an unexpected feast in the wilderness, a feast as surprisingly lifegiving as Herod's feast was shockingly death-dealing. What new persona did Jesus discover in himself amongst the multitude of hungry men, and women, and children? In feeding that crowd of thousands, did Jesus discover himself to be the yeasty love that could transform the inert flour of the crowd into a generous source of shared food? And did he discover that gratitude for two small smelly fish could be like treasure hidden in a field?

Jesus keeps growing, as he tries on new masks, finding as he does so that new aspects of his identity keep springing to life. But for him, as for all of us, this growth on the journey of selfhood isn't always pleasant, and has its soul-shaking moments. For sometimes to grow is to have to let go of an old mask, to let an old persona die, so that a new one can grow up in its place. And sometimes that sort of letting go only happens when there is some pressure from the outside, when we are encountered by a person who confronts some part of our self, and challenges it in a way that we cannot easily turn away from – though we might much prefer simply to be left alone.

And so it is with what happens to Jesus in today's Gospel story. He has come out of home territory – the comfortable home ground of Galilee. And now he is in the region of Tyre and Sidon. This is Gentile territory, and the woman who makes a claim on Jesus is identified by this Gospel as a Canaanite, the most hated and despised of Jewish enemies. It was the Canaanites that had possessed the land before it was conquered and became the land of Israel. (If you'd like an analogy, imagine a Lakota Sioux woman coming to ask for help from a white man who is part of an itinerant oil-rigging company in the Dakotas.)

This unnamed Canaanite woman is desperate to find help for her demon-possessed daughter. She does not come asking for help gently. She comes shouting. In fact the Greek verb for *shout* is onomatopoeic, and sounds much like the sound of a crow. She addresses Jesus and tries to make a claim on him by using one of his persona nicknames, "Son of David." In other words, by invoking Jesus' Davidic ancestry she in effect says, "OK, big guy, if you are the Messiah, prove it; help me!"

As so often happens when someone calls out some aspect of who we claim to be, in a way that makes us just wish that person would go away, Jesus simply ignores her. Apparently she then goes "caw-ing" after the disciples, because they come to Jesus begging him to send her away. But in the meantime something has gotten under Jesus' skin, because this time, he does not remain silent. He says to the disciples, not the Canaanite woman, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." I don't know about you, but I hear a note of defensiveness in Jesus' words. If you know your position is just, you don't have to justify it. So I am hearing Jesus' defensiveness as a sign that his self-perception that he is to be the Messiah only for Jews, that persona is beginning to get a bit wobbly. And this is how our self grows, I think. We move from absolute certitude about some mask we wear to wondering if there is something else under that mask that we ought to look at. It galls us to have to look, and it is often our "enemies" who help us to do that painful self-examination. (Is this one reason why Jesus commands us to love our enemies? They can be the stimulus for growing the truer, deeper Self to which God is calling us.)

Apparently she overhears what Jesus has to say, and calls on him again, begging for help. But Jesus' "I'm not supposed to be Messiah for Gentiles" persona hasn't crumbled just yet, and so he responds, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." To Jesus, the Canaanite woman still does not have a just (or to use his word, a fair) claim on his mercy. He seems to think there is only a limited amount of mercy to go around. But she does not give up. She replies, in effect, "I'm not asking you to throw me and my demon-possessed bitch of a daughter the fullness of food that belongs to your people. I'm only asking for crumbs, for leftovers." And that does it. Jesus turns. He repents. His narrow "I'm a Jewish Messiah sent just to Jews" persona falls down dead, and a new persona begins to stand up out of the grave in its place. Do her words about crumbs help Jesus to remember the 12 baskets of leftovers from the feeding of the multitude? Does he realize suddenly, "My God, there is enough mercy – plenty! – for Gentiles and Jews alike!" Is he ashamed of his "too little" faith in God, and awed by the greater faith in the compassion and mercy of God that this non-believer has, and does that strip away his "I'm a good Jew and the Messiah to boot" persona and the feeble faith that has gone with it? Has she become, in effect, his spiritual director,

challenging him to a deeper faith, and deeper self-understanding than he has ever had before? Apparently so. For in just a few verses, Jesus' self-perception of what sort of Messiah he is to be keeps growing, sloughing off the old Messianic persona like a dead snake skin, when he proclaims to the disciples a wholly new messianic vision: that the messiah must undergo great suffering, be killed, and be raised from the dead. Could we say, it is the Canaanite woman who spurs on Jesus to new depths of humility and vision, to realize the new persona he has not seen before? Is she the vehicle by which God holds out to Jesus a greater fullness of Self: that he is to be the Messiah for all, and that through his compassionate suffering with, and dying with and for all, the world will be raised to a new wholeness – where Jew and Canaanite are one, male and female are one, masters and dogs are one, and there are no more masters, no more hierarchies. Only one God who is all in all, and in whom we all are one. To that God, whose abundant mercy and compassionate love know no bounds, and burst through the tomb of every narrow persona, to that God be praise and glory for ever and for ever. Amen.