

Proper 21 A
St. Matthew 21:23-32
October 1, 2017
St. George's Bolton
Chris Rose

Fudging It

Who am I? What am really here to do?

We spend so much of our lives trying to be someone we are not. We live into roles we are given, until those roles seem to take over who we are. In the midst of playing the roles, it is difficult to find the real me anymore! Lord help us and lead us back home.

As simple as it would seem to be yourself, we are afraid because of what others might think and we fear what they will do to us if they discover who we really are, as though who we truly are is completely unworthy. Consider the Gospel this morning:
“And they argued with one another, if we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.’ So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’”

But there is no question but that they did know the truth! However, they were locked into being untrue to who they really were and what they truly believed to preserve the status quo. Fear ruled the day and dictated their actions and words. Fear.

This is one of the best examples of fudging it to protect yourself: “We do not know!” The longer you keep fudging about who you are and ducking the truth out of fear, the more you lose who you really are, and that matters very much!

We fudge about who we are the more we give into playing roles that are not who we are. We feel pressured to be someone who we are not. This often happens in the workplace, where we may become people whom we no longer recognize. This happens when you become an automaton, where you are told not to think for yourself, but to do what you are told. Live up to the expectations of the company and your boss, rather than following your own will or sense of the right thing to do. Do this long enough, and you will either suppress who you are out of a need for survival or completely lose who you are. In either case, anger builds up inside you for this self-betrayal, and it gets so hot that you start to get burned around the edges. This is what we call burn out. This happens when the value of living into a role for years is questioned, and the human cost to yourself is no longer worth the gain from the actions you are asked to take.

In some cases, we embrace a role because that seems to be who we think we are expected to be. Some positions in life have very strong role expectations: Mother, Father, Police-person, Teacher, Doctor, Priest. There are too many to list here. I can speak for the latter. As a priest, I became the role I was playing in life, until I forgot who I was underneath. What's so bad about that, you ask? Losing who I was underneath meant I forgot my call and motivation for being a priest in the first place. Being a priest became about other things, and when this happens, it is

like slowly selling or losing your soul. At the end of the process, it is difficult to distinguish between yourself and the role you are trying to play.

After I left the full time ministry in 2002, more and more of this role-playing started to be revealed to me. In my new work in the community, I never told anyone what I used to do, or that I was an Episcopal priest. Wouldn't you know that initially, for the first two years after I left employment in the church, people started to figure that out. Patients would say to me, 'Are you a clergyperson?' 'Are you a preacher?' 'Are you a religious leader?' And they asked these questions of me, without my wearing a uniform, or a cross on my chest. They asked these questions, even though I never quoted a word of scripture back then in the workplace. It began to dawn on me, that this role I had lived for so long had taken over my life in a way that I was unaware how I lived it in my life, day to day. I realized that that was not a good thing. I was paying lip service to my faith, and because I was not living the Gospel authentically, my words burned like that of hypocrisy on my lips. 'Do as I say, but not as I do!' I learned the hard way that it was time to start living by the words, and not paying them lip service. I am not holier than thou, trust me, and if someone acts that way, they haven't a clue about the meaning of true holiness!

Why you ask? Because living into a role is fudging it through life. The role dictates who we are and what we think we are supposed to do. It is about being inauthentic. And that is pretty serious. When you do not live authentically, and be true to who you are, you are not only fudging things for whatever reason, you are lying to yourself and others, and that is a very bad thing. You are bearing false witness, even though, because of living in a role, you may think you are a true witness.

Why is that important? If we are not true to ourselves, if we are living a lie, it will eat us up like a cancer. It takes a lot of effort to feed and live a lie, even if you are doing it most days unawares, it ultimately robs you of who you really are and the life God gave you to live, no matter how much the community around you pressures you to live up to their expectations, or to live the role you are supposed to live, according to their expectations.

Lip service. We must be sure our experience of church and our faith changes us and the people that we are. How many times have Christians been called hypocrites because they no sooner leave the parish hall after coffee hour and have a fight in the church parking lot or gossip about someone else? Many use this as an excuse not to take us too seriously. We need to take our faith and our authenticity seriously and be the people God has called us to be. There is where we will discover authenticity.

When you live by the expectations of others, you simple lose yourself in bits and pieces, until you have no self left to give.

To put flesh on these bones, let's talk about a few examples. Consider African Americans. The idea is that for an African American to be equal to us, they must be like us, (whatever that means). This has been a struggle for most black people most of my life. And when it comes to church and Christianity, at first we had the Bible and gave it to them, and I must say, now they have the Bible and we could surely take a lesson from their faithfulness. Where I live in a diverse community, I don't see a lot of white folks (though there are a few-I must admit) who not only

go to church on Sunday, but also go several nights a week. My African American neighbor puts me to shame with how she acts out and lives out her faith, and here I am, a lofty priest!

Or consider what gay people have gone through living up to the expectations of others and holding back who they are from others in fear of rejection or even worse. Gay people have lived this Gospel passage daily for much of my life, and all the while, they are only trying to simply live authentically and just be who God created them to be.

When we can all live authentically, then we can appreciate others for who they are and what gifts they bring to the common table. Then we can stop fearing those who are different from us or look different from us, or have different opinions from us. If we listen to others, we may learn from them.

You see, it's not what you do in this life that matters so much as who you are, and if you lose sight of who you are, nothing you do will really matter. It's all about who you are and whose you are.

Whose are we? We belong to God!

I feel I have made progress on trying to live more authentically. I know longer hear patients or co-workers telling me that they suspect I am some sort of clergy person. And when and if I tell a co-worker about my other vocation as an Episcopal priest, most say, 'your kidding' or they say they simply can't imagine that or see me in that role. Years ago, I might have been offended by those words, but now, when I hear them, I take them as the highest compliment I could ever receive. AMEN