

31st Sunday Ordinary Time
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

So, who were you for Halloween?

Here at Saint Mary's, the children at our school dress up in wonderful homemade costumes on October 31st. The rule is that they have to be either a Saint, or a figure from the Bible.

We gather on the back parking lot that morning, and then all of the children walk over to St. Mary's Woods to collect candy from the residents.

So this past Tuesday, after the 9:00 Mass, I went to my office and put on my costume. This year I was an Old Testament character – Joseph. The guy with the amazing, technicolor dream coat.

When I got to the playground, I saw lots of little girls dressed like the Blessed Virgin Mary. Little boys dressed like St. Francis and the Pope.

There was one little girl wearing a white sheet over her. When I saw her, I thought, “Wait, that is not a Biblical character!” Then I looked more closely. Of course, she had holes cut out so that she could see through the sheet, but I noticed that she had cut holes all over the sheet. Yes, she was the Holy Ghost.

There was the boy dressed in a knight – he was St. George. The fellow with arrows sticking out of him – he was St. Sebastian. There was a headless figure, carrying his skull by his side. St. Denis of Paris.

There was the little girl with a stuffed turtle – Saint Kateri. And of course, there was the girl with candles on her head, carrying a plate with two fake eyeballs on it. Saint Lucy.

As the parade of saints ended, I spoke to a little girl who was carrying a toy piano – St. Cecilia. She told me that she was dressing up like St. Cecilia for school, she was going to be a Disney Princess for trick or treat, and that she had been Wonder Woman for her Brownie troop party.

And the little boy standing next to her said, “Good Lord, how many costumes do you have?”

Now, I'm 54 years old and I have to admit that I *still* like to wear Halloween costumes. I still like to wear the masks or costumes each year. I get to choose who I want to be, what mask I want to wear. That can be fun.

But Jesus offers some serious warnings about those things if we, his followers, behave that way the rest of the year.

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus seems to be asking the same question I heard on the parking lots the other day: How many costumes do you have? How many masks do you wear?"

Why wear masks at all?

In this section of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is in conflict with the religious leaders of his day. At one point, Jesus calls them *hypocrites*, which is an ancient Greek word which refers to *people who wear masks*.

The origin of that word – hypocrite - goes back to ancient Greek theatre. There were limited numbers of actors, so each actor had to play many parts in the same show. How did they do that? They wore masks. Different masks for different characters.

That is fine on stage – it's not fine in life. Jesus calls the religious leaders "hypocrites" because they play one role in public, and another in private. They apparently want to 'look religious' when people are watching, but when they get home and take off their costumes and masks, their holiness is less evident.

They seem to wear a mask of godliness, but underneath the costume might be a frightened, judgmental, self-righteous, self-centered person. On the outside they appear to be in tune with God. But take the mask off, take the costume away, and you find the truth: they are people living in a chaotic swirl of turmoil, uncertainty and fear

Every religion has mask-wearers. So does every nation and neighborhood. Every church. Every family.

Good Lord, how many costumes do you have? How many masks do you wear?

In today's Gospel, Jesus points out how the leaders of his day love to dress up in costumes: with widened phylacteries and tassels, fancy sashes and do-dads, which draw attention themselves.

They like the appearance of holiness. They like being the center of attention. But once the mask was off and the costume set aside, you could not find many holy deeds.

Jesus pointed out that they put heavy burdens on other people, but were not willing to help their neighbor. They wanted to BE SERVED. They wanted the best table, the seats of honor, and the honorific titles that made them feel important.

How many costumes do THEY have? How many masks do WE have?

A wise student of the human condition has observed that every human being in the 21st century has at least three personas, three masks that we wear, three costumes we put on.

The first is the *public* person. The person you try to be when you are out in public. The person you like to be when you know that people are watching. This is the “YOU” that you portray when you are posting things on facebook.

This is the ‘public self’ - often a mixture of mild Christianity, Virginia manners, measured speech, attitudes primarily shaped by your favorite cable channel and your political party.

Then there is the *private* self. The person you are when you are alone – when you think no one is watching. What you say in private, or think to yourself. The attitudes you would never speak in polite company. The judgments. The racism. The hates and angers. The private self.

And thirdly? There is the *secret* self. The truth of who we are at our core. The person we are, those parts of ourselves, that we sometimes even want to deny, hide from ourselves, mask and cover.

There can be those parts of us that we want to push into the corner of our psyche so that not even we understand what is going on there. The stuff going on in us that we think will be too painful to deal with. The hard memories we want to avoid. Human beings can wear masks, even when we are alone and looking in the mirror.

Good Lord.

As I pack away my amazing technicolor dream coat and as I start thinking about next year’s Halloween costume, maybe I can ask myself - what masks do I wear, in public, and in private? What am I trying to hide from myself, or from God?

And why do I wear any masks at all? It takes so much energy to hide and pretend. There is freedom in integrity! The Word of God tells us that we *do not have to hide!* Jesus tells us that God knows us and loves us through and through.

God knows every layer of us, every facet of us. The Lord knows the truth about you better than you do!

And Christ died, not just to save the public you, the facebook you, but ALL of you. He died for you, not just because he loves you on your best days, but because he also knows the messy truth of you...and he loves you passionately just the same.

He is our savior and our friend. Trust him enough to take off your masks, and let yourself be loved. And then, as his disciple and servant, walk the world’s sidewalks and parking lots, and love others in the same way.

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