

The Scariest Mask

There was once a preacher in a small community that was well respected and worked very diligently to bring God's message to his congregation in fresh and meaningful ways. After dealing with prejudice (his own and other peoples') in various forms throughout the years, he came upon a plan.

He announced that he would be preaching a series of lessons, and would be wearing a different mask and costume each week. He knew that much of a person's prejudice had to do with visual images, and he wanted to show that the outside of a person was not always a good indicator of their insides. He called it "The Month of Masking", and he promised as a final lesson to wear the scariest mask that he could think of.

People are quick to see what doesn't look right. We are encouraged to do this in our education and now especially in our desire for better homeland security. But this idea can throw us off when we meet new people. The preacher wanted us to work at not rejecting people before we really get to know them. He wanted to counter the evil of prejudice.

There was much anticipation from the congregation as they waited for the series to begin and chattered about how they thought their minister was going to accomplish his mission.

The first week he appeared as a cripple, with a disfigured face and a body that was all hunched over. He used as his text the chapters in Isaiah that described the coming Messiah as someone who was not easy to look at¹.

For the second week, he showed up in a special costume that made him look extremely overweight. He came as a penniless beggar for the third week. And in the fourth week he somehow was able to achieve a general "ethnic" look – different skin color, different clothes, exaggerated facial features that were indicative of racial characteristics. And each week he talked about how we are all the same in the sight of God (neither Jew, nor Greek, etc.²). He taught that prejudice is as old as some of the oldest stories in the Old Testament. And it is as new as the saying: "You can't judge a book by its cover."

We are fooled too often by how someone looks rather than how they feel and behave. Our rock stars, television and movie stars, and politicians tend towards the beautiful and handsome. But that does not mean that they are good people. We have to learn to look beneath the surface³.

The anticipation of the church members grew steadily during the last week of the series. They waited impatiently after they became seated that last Sunday. Finally the minister entered from the side door, wearing a black veil over his face⁴. He stepped up to the pulpit and greeted his following.

He began by explaining that he was wearing the veil so as to not spoil the moment of "revelation". He summarized the previous lessons on prejudice and reiterated his promise to wear the scariest mask of all on this day. And with great ceremony he took off the veil.

To the people's great surprise, only his normal face showed. He was silent for a moment, letting the suspense build, and then he began to explain himself. The scariest mask, he said, was the one that not clearly meaningful in one way or another. By not having objectionable marks or features, it was easy to hide his true nature, though people around would think it was real. He could be the most evil person around, but because he didn't "look" like it, he could hide it. Perhaps we should wear disfiguring masks when we are about, especially when we go to church. In that way people would be on their guard about us.

The preacher emphasized that it is only by the heart that we should be judged – not by appearances. He asked them to consider a culture in which the people mutilate their facial features so that there is no physical basis for attraction. Then the inner self is all that there is to become known and appreciated. What a sacrifice to find the real meaning of life! It is so important to us to know that we are chosen only for the quality of our heart.

The congregation received this story in a very thoughtful manner, and when the service was over they all spoke their minister with great appreciation. None had suspected what the last (and

scariest) mask would be. And they all went home with a little better perspective on themselves and the people around them.

1. Isaiah 52:13-14, 53:2-3
2. Galatians 3:28
3. John 7:24
4. Remember Nathaniel Hawthorne's story "The Minister's Black Veil"

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