

We Wear the Mask

John 13:34 – 35

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

We wear the mask of grins and lies
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes
This debt we pay to human guile
with torn and bleeding hearts we smile
and mouth to myriad subtleties

Why should the world be over-wise,
in counting all our tears and cries.
Nay, let them only see us while
We wear the mask.

We smile but O, great Christ our cries
to thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing but oh the clay is vile
beneath our feet and long the mile.
But let the world dream otherwise.
We wear the mask!

Paul Laurence Dunbar



This is the powerful poem of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, it was written over 100 years ago, yet it still has a strong resonance in the ethos of the African American community today. We all wear the mask, no matter what ethnicity we claim. We all where the mask, no matter what church holds our membership. We all wear the mask, no matter our family origin.

We wear the mask to disguise the hurt that we can even talk about. And we wear the masks to hide the pain of hurt unknown – pain that some of us have never lived without. Our masks cover the betrayal of those who said out one side of their mouth “I love you,” and out of the other “You aint never gonna amount to nothing.” He told you he loved you when you were alone. But when other women were around, he pretended you weren’t. But he told you he loved you. You told him you liked flowers to show you he cared, but they never seemed to accompany him when he dropped by to. But he told you he loved you and you said in a whisper I love you too... but at a distance.

She said you were her best friend and you could talk for hours and about anything and everything. And when you had to hang up and go home she always said to you “you know I love you, girl.” When you wouldn’t steal the belt she adored so much at her part-time job at Dots –



she bullied you and said that you were just scared. You told her “no, I just don’t steal.” She then said she’d call you but she rarely did. You’d call her but it was not like before, but when you hung up she told you she loved you. And you said, I love you too but at a distance.

You see, we can’t trust anymore, so we wear the mask to “hide our cheeks and shade our eyes.” So as not to count all our “tears and cries.” But you know, we not only wear the mask but far too often we are the mask. We are so good at masking our masked hurt, and masking our deception that the truth be told, nobody really knows who you are. Many of us are making our way through life under the guise of the not-so-golden rule ‘do unto others before they do unto you.’ So we hold back and we resist being vulnerable with each other because “why should the world be over-wise”. No, let them only see us while, ‘we wear the mask.’

Judas entered the Upper Room that night –the night that Jesus was to be betrayed– wearing a mask. Jesus having already washed the feet of all the disciples including Judas, shares in the bread and the wine with them. While he was taking the bread and sharing the wine with Judas, He looks past Judas’ mask and speaks firmly and decisively to this broken betrayer and says, “That which you must do, go and do it quickly.”



This Judas poses somewhat of an enigma to most scholars you see because there's not a lot of character development of him in the text. Neither is there background of his family or his family name. Why then did Jesus choose him to be one of the twelve? One scholar poses that the spelling of Judas name in the Aramaic (Jesus' mother tongue), resembles the same spelling of the translated word "deliverer" in Isaiah 19:4, where it reads: "I will deliver the Egyptians into the hands of a hard master a fierce king will rule over them says the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts." While this is a sad theory, it is a theory I prefer because it gives Judas an identity beyond betrayer. It gives him a purpose and legitimacy.

So, back to the story in the Upper Room: Once Judas left the room, Jesus begins to share His final instructions to his beloved disciples. I hear him speaking tenderly to the remaining disciples saying, if I only had one thing to leave you it would be the command (my imperative) to love one another. This time not just your neighbor as yourself, but love each other. It will be your saving grace.

The new command that Jesus gives the disciples on this night, He gives to us, *"that you love one another; as He have loved us, . . . and by this all will know that we are His disciples, if you have love for one another."*



Love changes the game. You see Jesus' love for his disciples is visible and demonstrable love. It is an action and not an emotion. He doesn't ask us to 'have' love for one another, he asks *to be* love and *to do* love.

Like with Judas, Jesus sees through our masks. This new command requires that we remove our masks and lean into the courage to love. You see, Jesus knows that loving one another is no easy task. Who can hurt you more but people who are supposed to love you? He also knows that we can't give what we don't have, and that we can't go where we don't know. So, I hear him speaking tenderly to us tonight saying "trust me." Love one another as I have loved you. Trust me – just as I have loved you, I have already led you by example. I loved Judas. I washed his feet as an act of love even though he would still betray me. I loved Judas as I broke bread with him and then I loved him enough to let him go. Who do you need to love enough to let them go? Trust me.

I have taught you that the way to the Father is through me. As the Father has loved me, I love the Father and the Father loves you because you are mine. I have fed you and I have healed you, I have shown you that you can feed and heal the nations if you trust me. Won't you trust me tonight?



Like the disciples, we are learning that the life of faith is really not about us. It is when we are most willing to share out of ourselves without an agenda, the self-emptying love that Jesus demonstrates, that's when God is most able to hit your target and fill your life with abundance. All we have to do is trust him and serve him. It is so simple, it's complicated.

Many years ago when I began to teach Sunday School I felt I so unworthy. I didn't know if Corinthians was in the Old Testament or in the New Testament. The teacher I was assigned to shadow walked out of Sunday School in the middle of class on my second Sunday. She ultimately left the church I learned. Six weeks in, I finished class and waited for all the students to leave. Once the room was empty I began to pray to God saying, "I am sorry, I am sorry; this just isn't for me, God." I apologized for possibly fumbling the ball with His Word. As I prepared to leave the room, a student walked in. She told me she really was glad I was her teacher. It was the student's affirmation that mattered. It was God's affirmation that obedience is better than me thinking that this business of following Christ is about us. I think that's where Judas went wrong. God asks us to simply show up (and serve).



Jesus is still washing our feet and meeting around the table of communion. I want to trust Him. I want my ministry to point to him. Even if this story Maundy Thursday, I wanna trust Jesus. Even if Good Friday was the end of the story, I still wanna trust Him. Better yet, even if the light shines on Jesus and not on me, I all the better for it. For the light of Jesus points to Father. I covet all the earthly love I can get but I need the Father's love. Won't you trust him? "For we know God is no shorter than His Word, and if God said it, He will surely bring it to pass!"

Won't you take off your mask and let him use you? "A new command I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you. By this all will know you are my disciples. . ."

