

It's the Real Thing

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 18: 15-20

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Fake, we call it. All of us at sometime or another have seen a church that is fake, or we've seen people in church whom we would describe as fake. And what exactly does that mean? Well, I am guessing that many of us perhaps can't say what makes a church fake, and people fake, but you know them when you see them.

But here's an idea of what that looks like. Let's say Nicole Patricia and Francis all go to church together and have for years. And because they are all three human and all three imperfect, each of them has done things to the other two which the other two do not like. Well one day Nicole comes around to talk to Francis and rather than telling Francis what she did that she didn't like, she decides that would be uncomfortable, so what does Nicole do? She talks about what Patricia did. And because Patricia has also done a thing or two to Francis, Francis also tells about what Patricia did to her. Suddenly Nicole and Francis feel much better about each other. They have bonded over their offense and outrage over what Patricia has done. Now one day, of course, Patricia and Nicole are together, and again Nicole doesn't want to say anything to Patricia about that thing she did because, again, that would be uncomfortable, so what does she do? She talks about Francis. And as you have already guessed, Patricia does the same. What do we have here, and why is it fake? What we have here is the appearance of friendship, the appearance of closeness and intimacy between the trio of Nicole, Patricia and Francis, but it is a fake intimacy and it is a fake friendship. And it is fake for two reasons. First, when Nicole goes to Francis about Patricia instead of talking directly to Patricia, she is showing that she doesn't value being honest with Patricia and that is unfair to Patricia. That much

should be obvious. But what may be less obvious is that she is also being unfair to Francis. Nicole, after all, had a problem with Patricia. And the problem is between her and Patricia and no one else. But instead of dealing with her problem with Patricia directly, what does she do? She gives it to Francis. No wonder she enjoys talking to Francis about Patricia so much. Now, you would think that Francis wouldn't like that so much, and I assure you that she wouldn't unless she could also dump her problem with Patricia onto Nicole's lap as well. So what we have between these three again, it looks very much like friendship, but it is really just a dishonest system where no problem gets dealt with, no problem gets solved, and what builds and builds is mistrust between Nicole, Patricia and Francis.

Now, if you recognize yourself in this trio of Nicole, Patricia and Francis, do not worry and do not be afraid. I think we all recognize ourselves in this trio to some extent. We are all fake to some extent. We are not only fake in our churches, we are even fake in our own families from time to time among people we love dearly. So I am not worried if you have ever been fake before. If you are human, you have been. But what does worry me is this. I have found in my forty five years of life that most people are pretty good at sniffing out fakeness. And they also don't want fake. Years ago, back in the 70s I think it was, Coca-Cola had a slogan for their brand of sugar water where they said nothing more than "It's the Real Thing." People literally thirst for the real thing. In the philosophy classes I teach, like the one I'm teaching over at Malone right now, I sometimes ask my students to imagine the following. I say imagine that you could turn on some virtual reality machine that would give you every experience your heart has ever desired for the next twenty years. And while the machine was on, you would actually believe the experiences were real. So if you have ever dreamed of skiing in the Swiss Alps, while the

machine was on you would actually think the snow was hitting your face and you were gliding down the slopes at breakneck speed. If you've ever dreamed of lying on the beach in Aruba you would think you were lying on the beach in Aruba as you feel the gentle sea breeze and you feel the sun's rays hitting your skin and you watch the quiet fishing boats on the horizon. Whatever you have ever wanted to experience, you could experience for the next twenty years. And so what I say to my students is if you could have any experience your heart ever desired, if you could avoid getting stuck in traffic jams and worrying about paying your bills and worrying about getting a job, for the next twenty years, what would you do? What choice would you make? Would you turn on the machine? But here's the catch, I say, you couldn't turn it off. Once that machine is on, it's on for twenty years. So what would you do? Would you turn in on? Well, they think about it for a moment, but in the end one and all say "No way! No way, because it isn't real." They would rather have all the traffic jams and bill payments and uncertainty in their careers and have it be real, then any deception that is fake no matter how great it is. There is something deep within our souls that desires what is real. And the danger for us is that if people sniff out our fakeness they will be lead to believe that the Lord himself is not real. And they will believe that, because we are the only bible that most people will ever read.

But what we learn today in our gospel lesson is that our Lord commands us to put away all fakeness in our congregations and to establish what is real, real friendship, real relationships, real community in the name of a Lord who himself is real. In the name of a Lord who is so real that he said to the disciple Thomas in a story we tell every year during the Easter season to put his finger in the nail marks in his hand and to reach out and put his hand in his side and in that

effort to make us more real, he tells us this. "If another member of church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth, will be loosed in heaven." In other words, Jesus says, if someone in the church sins against you, don't immediately go to someone else and make it their problem. And certainly don't smile at that member and pretend that everything is okay while you dump your problem with someone else on him or her. What you do, Jesus says is you go to your brother or sister alone and you confront them. If they will not listen to you, then you can bring a couple of others along, and if they will not listen to them, you can take it before the whole church, but first, before you do all that, you go to your brother or sister and tell them. Now, you may say to me Pastor Rich, that's all fine and good but Jesus only says to go to your brother or sister when he sins against you. What if I don't know if my brother or sister sins against me but I really don't like what they did. Do I go and confront them then. And how often should I confront my brother and sister. Should I confront them about every single petty annoyance I have with them, or should it only be on the big things. The things that really matter. And how long after the fact do I need to confront them. Does it need to be the next day, or do I need to wait until I cool down a bit and I don't say things I don't mean, but on the other hand I know I can't wait too long because if I wait too long, they will have forgotten all about it. You know what, I don't have the answer to these questions. Jesus doesn't

tell us these things, so your guess is as good as mine. But I also think we can get so bogged down in the details of what Jesus tells us to do that we miss the big picture of what he is saying to us. What he is saying to us is that he does not come in the name of fake. He comes in the name of real. He knows that for whatever reason there is deep inside us, we hunger for the real. And he has come so that in our relationships with each other we can have the real thing, because he is the real thing.

Does it really matter that we have a real community instead of a fake one? Does it really matter if we have real relationships instead of fake ones? Well, let me tell you this. I talk to people all the time, all the time who tell me that they don't believe that God is real. People who tell me that they think the God of the bible is just as much a figment of human imagination as the gods on Mount Olympus. You can ask them why they believe that, and they will give you all kinds of reasons such as well, I don't see any proof or I have to see things for myself to believe them or I don't know about this or I don't know about that. And sometimes when I am talking to such people I will go point by point and respond to each of these things they say. But whether they will admit this or not, I am convinced that the number one reason for believing that God is fake is that people so often believe that we Christians are fake.

When they were little, my kids grew up watching programs like Dora the Explorer and Veggie Tales. In my parent's generation the children's programming was Howdy Doody and the Mickey Mouse Club. But my generation I am convinced is the best generation because we grew up with Mr. Rogers. If you ever watched Mr. Rogers, who, by the way, was a Presbyterian minister, you know that there were two parts to his show. There was the part of the show where he opened the door of his house and talked to you for a while as if you were sitting right

there with him, the part that was so very real if you were a little child and then there was the part where he would say "Let's journey to the world of make believe." And the world of make believe would have characters like King Friday and Lady Elaine Fairchilde and Henrietta the cat, and the neighborhood trolley. It was a show within a show, and no matter how little you were you knew it was all pretend. Well, sometimes I wonder if whenever we go into church for an hour a week we go into a world of make believe just like Mr. Rogers' world of make believe. And maybe that isn't all bad. We may need to escape the real world every now and then. But it is bad when you consider the fact that the Lord we serve is no make believe Lord. He is as real as you and I. "Put your finger here and see my hands," he said to Thomas. "Reach out your hand and put it my side." The risen Lord whom we serve is as real as you and I.