

The Rev. Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Easter 7 (B) ~ May 12, 2024
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
Psalm 1
John 17:6-19

*Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid:
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love
you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord, Amen.*

I wonder if I am the only one here this morning who finds the words of this prayer intimidating:

all hearts are open,

all desires known,

no secrets are hid.

Nowhere to hide.

Virtually every week we begin our worship of God by praying together the Collect for Purity, acknowledging that – no matter the state of our bodies, minds, and souls when we shuffle in here – God knows us.

God knows *all* of us – those parts of which we are proud and about which we rejoice, and those parts of ourselves that we would just as soon keep hidden from the world.

So we might as well just go ahead check our masks, check our personas, at the door.

What do I mean by this?

I'm going to ask you to reflect with me for a moment. How much time, how much energy, do you spend in a given day curating an image to project to the world? Ponder that for a second, if you will.

Perhaps you want to be seen as successful, so you *dress* a certain way.

Perhaps you want to be seen as intelligent, so you *speak* a certain way.

Perhaps you want to be seen as good, so you *act* a certain way.

I do not mean to imply that any of us here is inherently inauthentic...and yet: I suspect that we all “fake it till we make it” from time to time.

We want love, we want approval, we want esteem, we want acceptance...yet, deep down, we are all-too familiar with the reasons why we are undeserving, why we are unworthy.

“If you only knew the **real** me...”

It's a pernicious, an evil, thought routine:

If you only knew the real me...

...you wouldn't respect me.

Or

...you wouldn't accept me.

Or

...you wouldn't love me.

Fill in the blank.

I'm willing to bet that that tape has run through most of our heads at one point or another. It's a common human experience. It may be one of the *universal* human experiences. So many of us live like icebergs floating in the ocean, with the majority of our “selves” hidden under water, submerged. We only allow a part – our *image* – to be

seen by others. We try to conceal who we really are, sometimes from the very people we love and admire the most.¹ As a result, we put on a *persona*, a mask, of someone we think others want to see and know and spend time with.

But that *persona* isn't who we really are. And it's dangerous: Think about what kind of damage an iceberg can do.

And so we need to check our personas at the door.

Imagine if there were a basket in Founders' Hall, right by the coat rack and umbrella stand, where each of us could deposit our masks before walking into church. Where we would leave our pretense behind, if only for a while, in order to be real and wholly authentic before God and one another.

What might that look like?

Sobering, isn't it?

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid.

It's not accidental that this prayer comes at the very beginning of our worship. It sets the tone, causing us to pause, before we do anything else, and align ourselves with God. The prayer acknowledges that each of our hearts needs cleansing – for reasons as unique and particular as we are.

And that, my friends, is just fine. In fact, it's more than fine: It's good. It's really good.

Because it means that cleansing is possible.

No one is so "dirty" or lost or unforsaken as to be beyond the reach of God's loving embrace.

All hearts are open.

All desires are known.

No secrets are hid.

¹ <https://www.oprah.com/health/if-you-really-knew-me/all>

Today we heard the pivotal story from the Acts of the Apostles about how the earliest followers of Jesus reorganize themselves after the betrayal and death of one of their own. I mean that word “pivotal” literally, because they are at an inflection point, trying to discern what in the world to do now. According to Luke, who wrote Acts, Jesus has just ascended to heaven – a moment that the Church in the Western world observed this past Thursday. (Our Orthodox sisters and brothers will celebrate the Ascension in June.) For 40 days since Easter Jesus had appeared to them, helping them to understand the Resurrection by showing them His wounds, by cooking for and eating with them, by interpreting Scripture and breaking bread with them. From Jerusalem to Emmaus to the shores of Galilee, He met with, walked with, *lived with* them – teaching about the Kingdom of God and preparing them for life without Him.

And now He is gone. Jesus promised them that He would not leave them comfortless, that He would send the Holy Spirit to empower and enliven and advocate for them...but that hasn't happened yet. So they are left trying to figure it out.

What's more, they are down a man. Judas is gone – and while this means that there is one less mouth to feed, which may be a good thing, it's a problem. Twelve signifies wholeness, or perfection, and in the Bible it almost always represents the leadership of the Church. (Think of the twelve tribes of Israel, for example.)² One of their own number, who had been entrusted with a share of the ministry given to them by Jesus, has turned away, and their ranks are incomplete. Judas must be replaced.

So, the eleven come together in the first official council of the newborn Church, and they pray for guidance: “Lord, you know everyone's heart.” (In Greek, “you are the knower of the hearts,” *kardiognostes*. Isn't that a lovely epithet for God?)

They pause to align themselves with God and ask God to show them who should round out the roster. And Matthias' number comes up.

Here's the thing: Matthias is never mentioned again in Scripture. Tradition says that he went on to Christianize parts of what is now Turkey, but there is no hard evidence to that effect.³ Clearly he didn't set the world on fire with his preaching or teaching or healing or evangelizing, or else we would know more about him. St. Paul he's not.

² <https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/what-should-we-know-number-12-in-the-bible.html#>

³ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Matthias>

Yet God calls Matthias – just like Simon Peter, and Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot before him (Luke 6:14-16).

Think on that for a second: God, “knower of the hearts,” chose Judas Iscariot, the one who betrays Jesus. The one numbered among those whom Jesus fed, and with whom Jesus walked and laughed, and before whom He wept. The one numbered among those whose feet Jesus washed. The one who presumably neither perfectly loves nor worthily magnifies God’s holy Name.

We might well imagine Judas saying, in the depth of his heart, “If you only knew the real me...”

Did God make a mistake with Judas? I’ll let you ponder that for yourselves, but I can tell you that my theology demands that I answer “no.” God, “knower of the hearts,” invited Judas to the Table – just as God invites you and me.

Yes, Judas “turned aside to go to his own place”...*and* we know that is not the end of the story. If the Gospel teaches us anything, it’s that the worst that humans have to offer is no match for the God of the universe, the God of resurrection, the God who knows everyone’s heart.

Which is really Good News for you and me.

Imagine God knowing absolutely *everything* about you – the good, the bad, and the ugly. Try to get your head around the fact that God sees the wholeness of who you are, right this very moment, and loves you – desperately. Just as, it must be said, God loves Judas.

So put down your mask and “come to this table, you who have much faith and you who would like to have more; you who have been here often and you who have not been for a long time; you who have tried to follow Jesus and you who have failed; come.”⁴

God, the “knower of the hearts,” has invited you here. *Amen.*

⁴ *Iona Abbey Worship Book* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2001)