

Down from the High Bar
Jesus on Pretending and Authenticity
Maple Grove UMC
August 15, 2021
Rev. Patricia Wagner

The Beatitudes and 2 Timothy 1: 1-9

From Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

³I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. ⁴Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. ⁵I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.

⁶For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; ⁷for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

⁸Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, ⁹who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace.

I had a conversation with a friend that hasn't been in church for a while. He has struggled with faith and if felt to him that essentially churches like ours are fortresses where people show up and pretend to believe and to love God and care for the poor, a place of hypocrisy, posing.

Its a sobering thought: why would anyone want to be part of a church if that's what happens here. I wouldn't.

A church, authentic worship, is where we should be able to express who we really are, underneath all the disguises and polish we may apply to the outside world.

Where we can sing and say *Just as I am*, I come affirming the ancient truth that we live our lives in the presence of the divine that comprehends everything, loves everything and that includes us.

We come here to **not pretend**.

Another friend taught me about that: she said when she had her 20th high school reunion she dieted for weeks and got a new outfit.

When she had her 30th, she got the new outfit but didn't lose the weight. When she had her 50th, she just threw on a pair of jeans and went. It was time just to be herself.

It feels like it's that time for me, and for you, for us. Even here and now, in worship, even when we have to lean into the hymn writers', or our parent's or each other's faith to sing these songs and say these prayers muffled a bit by masks and doubts.

To sing through our masks make song no less powerful; to sing through our doubts makes us no less authentic. **This path is** where we are called to be, **this community** is what we are called to belong to.

I've heard drag artists talk about their performance. It may seem all pretense and makeup but they were revealing something in themselves that would normally be hidden, an aspect of themselves difficult or unacceptable to reveal to others.

We all have that, even Simone Biles, arguably the greatest gymnast of all time. This girl born in Columbus, Ohio declared aloud that her mind and body were not in synch, that stress had stolen her equilibrium and she wasn't able to perform safely on the world stage. And so was stepping back. And it took a moment for us, even the most sympathetic, to get

past our shock and disappointment. We like to see her do what no one else does, what we could never do; and make us proud of ourselves, our nation, through her.

And then, hearing the danger that she was in, there was relief. Relief that she had not gone ahead and injured herself.

Some of us remember in 1996 when gymnast Kerri Strug had an ankle injury, but, to please her coach did the vault, stuck the landing then tore two more ligaments.

It seemed to me this took just as much courage, and more, to come down from the high bar: my life is more than performing for you, and this is not good for me.

And suddenly, we too were given permission, all we non-Olympians, to be ourselves.

I've been thinking of that song: *Just as I Am*, and the verse:

*Just as I am - though toss'd about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come!*

O Lamb of God... Maybe one of the reasons why Jesus is so powerful in our lives, is that he was his own self.

He did not hide the burden that was on him, the frustration with his mother and the disciples when they didn't understand him, his sorrow in the garden as he hung on the cross, dying.

If he had a question of his interrogators, of those who came to him for healing, of those who criticized his understand of God, he asked it.

If he had knowledge of God, he shared it.

He was completely himself. The self that God called forth from him, had he hid his thoughts, his questions, he would not have been killed. Had he been willing to be inauthentic he might have lived out a long life but he wouldn't have been our savior.

And he didn't want us to hide either, or be ashamed of our vulnerabilities; The Beatitudes make that clear:

He says: You, who are poor, in life, or in Spirit - you are blessed, you who are meek, you are blessed, you who suffer for my sake, you are blessed and on and on...

You may feel diminished by the world but God sees your authentic self and blesses you. Don't forget that.

And Saul, whom the risen Christ spoke to on the Damascus Road and stripped away all pretense: *Why do you persecute me?* he asked Saul. And Saul knew that he was known, and it was devastating, and it was liberating, and he claimed a new name, Paul, and an authentic life.

And he acknowledges in this letter Timothy, and his mother, Eunice and his grandmother Lois, their sincere faith. The word sincere comes from the Latin *sine cera*, without wax, for there were those who would sell vessels, clay pots that had cracked and were fixed with wax, a way of pretending they were whole when they were not.

It is the sincere, the authentic, the true vessel that you are, that must come forth, says Paul. The gift of God is within you, a spirit not of fear of what others think of you, but of power and love and self-discipline.

So, don't be ashamed. You have been called with a holy calling, and responding to God's own purpose and grace in you.

To stop pretending who we think others want us to be and to claim our authentic self, to claim God's own purpose and grace in us. That's what we claim on Sunday morning. That is our power and our story. And now we will hear Xema's but first we'll sing: