

“We are God’s House”

1 Corinthians 3: 1-9

This week, as I was preparing for this sermon, I came across a quote from a commentary that stayed with me all week. It simply said, “The quest for spirituality may produce an illusion.” The quest for spirituality may produce an illusion. This got me thinking of all the illusions that we strive to keep up in our lives and all the illusions we strive to especially keep up in church.

In our lives, how much money do we spend on make-up, hair dye, and spunks? At one point, this would have been just a question for the ladies but now 5th Avenue has created products designed to help the men keep up their appearance of youth and virility. As men and women, how much time and effort do we spend trying to craft an appearance to the world that we have it all together when in reality, sometimes, we are just lucky enough to find a clean pair of socks in the midst of the chaos that we call life? Let’s face it, we all have these personas that we put forward each and every day and yes while we are being honest, we also need to admit that we have different personas for different situations.

But how much of that is real and how much of it is just an illusion that we have crafted to make people think we have it all together? And while we are asking these hard questions of ourselves, we should also be asking the same hard

questions of our churches as well. There are different persona churches all around us. A different type church for each and every type of believer. But how much of it is real? How much of it are illusions, crafted and created to bring people in the doors?

We as the Church, as communities of faith, spend a lot of our time presenting an image that we are the place to be, that we have got it all figured out, that if people would just come and join us that their lives will be better and all their problems would be fixed.

Now don't get me wrong. I think on some very basic level that all churches hope that when people come into their buildings, that lives will be changed and transformed, that somehow a connection with the Gospel of grace and love is made, that at the very least, the person is welcomed and embraced as God's Beloved. We wouldn't be the Church if we didn't. But so many times, all that stuff, transformation, the love and grace of God, all that stuff gets lost under the programs, gets forgotten under the illusion of gloss and shine. All that stuff about the Kingdom of God being in our midst, often gets lost behind all the smoke and mirrors that it takes to uphold an image of the perfect church and people are left wondering, how much of our community of faith is real and how much of it is just an illusion when all the illusions fail, like the times when church people fight, like

the times when the Church speaks hate in the name of God, like when the Church allows abuse to go on behind its doors.

To be honest, I'm not sure I had ever really given much thought to this idea, this idea that our quest for spirituality may produce more illusion than allow us to experience reality, probably because I didn't want to really face the frailties and brokenness of the church because there is already enough brokenness in the outside world, why would I want to acknowledge more?

But I had an experience this past week that reminded me that it is in our frailties and brokenness, that we often find God the most. On Tuesday, a woman came in for assistance and we started talking because her issue needed more help than a simple check from the ministerial funds. I made a few phone calls, using my best and authoritative minister voice and persona to get the ball rolling on a few things. And then when I hung up the phone, the woman said something really shocking to me. She said, "Oh, Heather, I wish I could be like you. You are so confident, so put together. You are not afraid of anything. I just wish I could be like you."

Now the reason I say that this shocked me is because that was not how I was feeling at all that morning. I knew all that stuff she was lifting up was just my minister persona, the persona that comes out when I see an injustice and no one is

speaking for the least of these but in reality, that morning I was feeling more like a mess than a minister all because it had been one of those mornings. You know, one of those mornings where everything goes wrong and it is just better to go back to bed so you can start all over.

That morning, I honestly felt like I was failing, failing my family, failing my church, failing in my school work, failing, failing failing. That morning was full of tears and frustration, and these things weren't just coming from the kids. That morning, everywhere I looked just seemed to remind me that I was failing, barely keeping it together.

So here I was completely surprised that this woman was telling me that I seemed confident and put together when all I really felt like was a big old mess, failing miserably at everything.

I responded to this woman's statement as honestly as I could. I simply said, "Oh, believe me. I have my days. I can tell you that you don't want to be because believe me there are days when I don't have it all together."

We all have moments like these and this conversation with this woman got me wondering how much of our lives are real and how much is just illusion. And in the same way, how much is our quest for spirituality real and how much of it is really an illusion that we are trying to achieve? The reason why I say this is

because one of the greatest things about church is that we hold this higher standard for a way of being. We ask ourselves, “What would Jesus do”. We try to grow in our faith through prayer and Bible reading. We try to become the person that God created us and calls us to be. We want to ultimately live into this image, this understanding of what it means to be a servant of God which is great but...

I would also argue that this image, this understanding of a higher standard of what it means to be a servant of God is also one of the worst things crippling the Church nowadays. This image, this understanding that we hold ourselves to a higher standard is sometimes more of an illusion that we have created because we don't want to face reality. We don't like to admit that we are vulnerable. We don't like to admit that we are broken. We don't like to admit we have problems. We don't like to admit that sometimes we are doing good just to get out of bed in the mornings All because there is this perception among the church world that coming to church will fix all our problems, will guarantee us smooth sailing along our paths and yes at the very least, if we come to church, than we will be made perfect in every way.

This way of thinking, this higher standard, has turned our faith in God, or at the very least, Christianity we claim to practice into some sort of brand, a brand that has been cleaned up, marketed with slogans and catch phrases, and photo

shopped to take away all the blemishes until there is nothing left but this illusion of perfection, left with a church full of shiny, happy, perfect people.

And the fact of the matter is that Christianity is made up of so much more stuff than that. Our very core story is ugly. We celebrate that a man died on the cross and no matter how hard we try, we cannot clean that up. That death was brutal. It was violent. It was painful. It was ugly.

As people of faith, we need to realize that we cannot ignore our frailties or brokenness. And we cannot strive for just one perfect label, just one perfect viewpoint, just one perfect image or phrase to capture our beliefs as people of faith and the same holds true for us as people within the church as well. We are so much more than people looking for perfection. We are people of faith who are broken, who have baggage, who have questions, who have doubts, who have ups and downs in life. We are simply servants of God, doing the best that we can with the resources that God gave us, knowing that we are a work in progress, striving to be in relationship with one another. That's what's real about the Church. That's what's real about Christianity. That's what's real about being a person of faith. There are no illusions. It is just us, living together, working together, hoping together, trying to become the people that God created us to be.

Or let me say it another way: One of my favorite authors compared the branding of Christianity to the branding she experiences as a writer. In one of her blogs, she states that in the publishing world, there is a lot of talk around a writer's brand, meaning the general impression an author leaves with readers based on personality, writing style, favorite topics, marketing, packaging, and audience. And then she goes on to say, that nowadays, it's not just authors or experts that have brands. We live in a world where we all have our own brands, thanks to things like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and all sorts of other types of social media. And "over time, as our life gets distilled into these little pixels, and it's easy for the people who see them—be they friends, acquaintances, or perfect strangers—to assume they represent you in your totality. Even more frightening, as you gather feedback and gain friends/followers/subscribers, you can start to believe it too. But we are not our messages, no matter how much we believe in them. We are not our filtered photos, or our tweets, or our political and religious ideologies. We are not even the stories we tell, no matter how carefully and truthfully we tell them. We are not our brands. We are human beings—little bundles of cells and relationships and hopes and fears that can never be crammed into images or words."

In other words, we are not our illusions nor are we the personas that we work hard to create so that we can impress others. We are all just human beings,

doing the best we can, with the gifts and talents that God gave us, working to help bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth and it is this reality that we should be striving to live out among our communities of faith.

We are not a Brand. We are not the Message. We are just God's Servants, living each and every day, celebrating that we are a work in progress, constantly being shaped and molded, healed and made whole by the grace and love of our God.

That's one of the reasons why I love this text. Paul holds nothing back in his letter to them. He calls them out and he shatters the Corinthian's illusions about their church. He calls them petty. He tells them that they are jealous. He tells them that all they do is fight among themselves like babies and if they are going to act like babies, than he is going to treat them like babies. He completely shatters their illusions, these illusions of who is the greatest, these illusions of perfection. He shatters their brand of Christianity, this brand that they had spent so much time crafting and creating and hoping to achieve, just trying to impress other people, just trying to maintain this illusion of perfection. And Paul says no one's buying it

He even goes as far to say that if anyone was looking to know more about Jesus Christ and Christ's love and this person visited this church in Corinth, and saw how this group was acting, this person would go running in the other direction.

Paul tells this group in Corinth that they are the least likely to show anyone what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. No one wants to buy their brand of Christianity. The Corinthians are not fooling anyone with all their illusions and slogans of greatness. They are all smoke and mirrors that in no way reflect the reality of the Kingdom of God.

He tells them that's not the way faith in God works. That's not how being Christians transformed by the love and grace of God works. Transformation only works when we understand that no one is perfect, that we all come to God, to our communities of faith with baggage, that we all come to our journeys of faith with problems. That's what grace really is. A starting point for us. An opportunity to treat each other with respect and with love, an opportunity to realize that we are so much more than our illusions and our personas. We are Servants of God, loved more than we could ever imagine, claimed and named as God's Beloved.

And the same holds true for us today. Our starting point for us to come together as a community of faith is grace. In reality no one figures out what it means to be a servant of God all on their own. No one figure out what it means to become the person God created us to be all on our own. No one completes the quest for spirituality all on their own.

We each have our part to play. We each are called to share our God given talents with one another, building up the Body of Christ. We are each called to rely on each other along the way, not so that we achieve perfection or complete the quest but so that all of God's creation can truly experience the Kingdom of God fully in our midst.

The thing we must never forget, even when we want to hold onto our illusions or become that person everyone thinks we really are, the thing we must never forget is that we aren't coming to church because we are perfect. We are coming to church because we had experience with the Risen Lord. And that experience opened our eyes to see beyond the labels, to see beyond the slogans, to see beyond the beautiful photo shopped pictures, to see, that in reality, all of us are works in progress. To see that God is constantly working and shaping us, constantly healing and bringing reconciliation to us, constantly supporting us along our journey to become spiritually mature. To see that God is constantly calling us to be God's servants, working together, living together, being in relationship with one another so that bit by bit, the illusions of this world fall away and the Kingdom of God becomes more and more of a reality each and every day.

We are so much more than our message of hope, so much more than a message of love and grace. We are God's servants, working together to make these wonderful messages a reality for all of God's creation. We are so much more than

slogans and catchphrases meant to answer all our questions. In reality we are the people of God, invited to be a part of something amazing, invited to be in partnership with God while God constantly works to redeem, restore, and renew God's creation.

We are Servants of God, as works in progress, living together, working together, to make the Kingdom of God a reality for all of God's creation.

May we never ever forget that. Amen.