

Jeremiah 31:31-34 The Real Thing

Years ago I purchased a print of a Thomas Kinkeade painting. Along with the print came a certificate of authenticity, enabling me to prove that it was not a mere copy, but one of the “official” prints taken from the original painting. Of course, I am not in a position to prove the authenticity of the certificate of authenticity. The principle applies to other things.

Nowadays there is such a thing as laminate flooring, for instance, that looks like real hardwood, or real marble or tile. I once owned a pair of sunglasses that I somehow inherited from one of my sons. Sunglasses have always been an issue for me, they are always breaking or I am losing them. I never buy expensive ones.

People were coming up to me and saying, “Mr. Allison, you're rocking the O's.” I didn't know what they meant. Apparently there is a designer brand of sunglasses called “Oakleys.” You can get a pair for around \$110. I always said that I was sure mine were just an imitation, a cheap knockoff, not the real thing.

I am reminded of the “Coca-cola” commercials from my childhood, “I'd like to teach the world to sing, in perfect harmony . . . “ The ad line was , “Coke, the real thing.” There is an undercurrent that runs through this concern for authenticity, whether something is the genuine article. The implication is that imitation is

cheap, generic is less valuable, and deception is involved.

Hypocrisy

In the realm of religion there has arisen a criticism that I am sure you have heard. People are quick to notice “hypocrisy” among the faithful. Actually, Jesus is the first one to come out with it when he, rather harshly as a matter of fact, criticized the Pharisees by calling *them* “hypocrites,” coining the term, implying that they were play-acting their religion.

The term “hypocrite,” is really just the old Greek word for “actor,” and it referred to those in the theater who acted out plays in front of audiences. We don't think of actors as hypocrites when it turns out they are not really like the people they depict, but that is because because when we go to a play or a movie or watch a drama on TV, we *know* they are acting.

In the course of everyday life it is disappointing when people deliberately misrepresent themselves. When someone plays at love or friendship all the while aiming for some selfish end, one may feel used and betrayed and may become angry and resentful. Instead, we long for honesty and integrity, people whose word is good, who display in their actions the truthfulness of their words.

The Faithful

When it comes to religious people, it is problematic when believers play at “faith”. Religion, at its worst, attracts the actors, those out for selfish gain, and it is a major theme in the bible to draw out this kind of faith as inadequate, and to call for and awaken genuine faith.

This dynamic is apparent in two of the leading characters in the biblical story, Abraham and David, both of whom could have been seen as hypocrites. Abraham was affirmed, “Abram believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Yet he did not always act faithfully. In his heart he was true. God knows what is in our hearts.

Even though he had failures like with Pharaoh in Egypt where he almost lost Sarah, who was to be the mother of the great nation; or when he took the servant-girl Hagar and had a son, Ishmael, because he did not see how he could be the father of a great nation if he had no children, he was commended nonetheless because he trusted that God would keep the promise.

And David, though corrupted by power committing adultery and murder, is nevertheless commended as a “man after God’s own heart,” and we can see in the 51st Psalm, which we have prayed together here today, the intimate portrait of a truly penitent man seeking forgiveness and redemption, the restoration of

a pure heart, with a contrite spirit. We are challenged to examine our faith.

Jeremiah

Our text this morning comes from Jeremiah and is well-known because it is quoted in the New Testament, in the book of Hebrews. This situation is this, Israel has fallen into complete disrepair, and is no more. The prophet, along with Ezekiel, faces a devastated people, a ruined homeland, and a future in exile. What is worse is the conclusion that their plight is the result of their unfaithfulness.

Yet he offered the people a vision that even today inspires us, urges us on, and gives hope;

“This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time’ declares the Lord. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.’”

We find a similar idea in Ezekiel, “I will give them an individual heart and put a new spirit in them. I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.”

We are challenged by the idea of internalizing God's law so that it becomes a reflection of our own inner life rather than something more superficial.

The Real Thing - Faith

Is it helpful to speak of "authentic" and "inauthentic" faith? One internalized, the other on the surface? One living and the other legalistic? One the spirit and the other the letter? Does it help to speak of faithfulness and unfaithfulness? After all, none has been perfected.

It helps me. To be sure it serves no purpose if I justify judgment of others, that is, if I disobey the scriptures which tell me not to judge others but to examine myself. In that way I am helped by these categories.

I did not come by salvation naturally. It was offered to me and I accepted it when I was very young and did not fully understand. At every stage of my life I have found my own faith (and understanding) lacking, not absent, but not perfected either.

The biblical idea of sanctification means, in terms of our text, that God is writing God's law on my heart, over time, as my life is lived out. Sanctification is a process not a once and for all time event. I am constantly in need of forgiveness and transformation; to bring about a better love, a truer faith, and a stronger peace. The renewal of the mind and heart are

well-begun, thanks be to God, but not completed. I long for a purer faith.

Sometimes a child will obey a rule because if they do not they will be punished; if they do, they will be rewarded. It is a reflection of maturity when they reach the point when their obedience stems from their agreement with the rule, that the rule is right. This is the internalization of the law by faith. Having come to agree with it, they have come to love it.

When the 10 Commandments were given to Moses, they were written on tablets of stone and given to Moses to give to the people. It turns out that they were an imposition on the people who were not in ready agreement with them. They failed to keep them, as do we.

The promise of Jeremiah is that God will write them on us, in us, that we are the tablets. What an amazing promise?

Is my faith The Real Thing or a cheap knockoff? The greatest sermon title ever, "If I were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict me?"

Thanks be to God for this divine promise!

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