

Rev. Kate LeFranc

Preached at Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church, October 26, 2014

Matthew 22:34-46

I've been leading a monthly Theology on Tap group with two other local pastors, and this month our theme was a combination of Halloween and All Saints' Day. We started out by sharing any Halloween or fall traditions we had, and some people shared elaborate traditions while others didn't have much of anything. The woman next to me commented that for her, Halloween was a time when the mask comes off, rather than putting a mask on.

She didn't say much more, but that comment resonated with me. I don't usually plan my costumes very much, and then I dig around in my closet to see what I can pull together. So I shared that my "tradition" has been costumes that other people didn't think were costumes; I'd be all set to go out, and then show up at a party and people would say, "Oh, you didn't dress up!" And I'd protest, "No, I'm a bike messenger!" or a roller derby girl, or a punk rocker, and they'd say "yeah, you just look like yourself."

Which I guess is fair, since I just built my costume around something I wanted to wear that year.

I haven't decided what I'm going to do this year, except I have some great new boots I want to wear. And I found this mask that's pretty cool! I don't usually wear masks though, because no matter how comfortable they are, they get annoying pretty quickly. There's something new right around the edges of your vision, something really subtly and oddly different.

* * *

So as I was thinking about masks and identity and who I want to be this year, I got to thinking about our text for today. Jesus continues in debate with Jewish leaders from a few different groups, each one trying to back him into a corner of some kind, or trip him up over his own words. As they all twist words together, trying to pick apart some meaning, finally a lawyer steps up for the moment of truth. Teacher, he says, which commandment is the greatest?

And the first part of his answer shouldn't have been any surprise to the Pharisees: Jesus quotes the Shema, the greatest commandment in the Jewish tradition. And the uniqueness of that commandment is its all-encompassing nature. This is not a commandment that we can satisfy by simply not killing anyone, not stealing, not being dishonest. This greatest commandment is the greatest because of its implications for our whole lives. Love the Lord your God with your *whole* heart, your *whole* mind, your *whole* soul. It requires a degree of proactive choice — a conscious turning toward God and toward the things God loves.

When Moses first delivers this commandment to the people, it doesn't stop with the words Jesus quotes — it comes with instructions: "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away,

when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

These are not words we can maybe remind ourselves of once a week in church — the very nature of this greatest commandment is the way it colors every single thing we do, everywhere we go, every day of our lives. It becomes the lens through which we are asked to see the world and our own lives within it.

Choosing to follow God means to choose to look at the world through God-colored glasses, or perhaps a God-shaped mask. There’s something different now, all around the edges of my view, reminding me that something is different; everything is not as it seems. And that different thing, that new face with which we’re asked to see the world: it is *love*.

Love, with all our hearts, all our souls, all our might – that is God’s law. We do all sorts of things throughout the day, but first and foremost all of those other things that occupy our lives should be seen through this filter of the love of God and the love for one another.

Which sounds huge and daunting, and maybe it should. God is asking for nothing less than a reorganization of every single thing in our lives. Each activity, each priority, has to be seen again through this question: does this demonstrate a love for God and a love for all people?

Well, now, what exactly do you mean by *love*, the lawyer might ask in response. There are all sorts of love in the world. And it’s a big word, a loaded word sometimes! The first times we say “love” to another person can be full of any number of big feelings – it’s daunting, because somehow it doesn’t just describe a feeling; we put so much weight on it that it comes to mean a sense of commitment, maybe, a certain degree of intensity, and the possibility of some new expectations for the relationship. It’s not something to take lightly.

I know there have been times for me when saying (or hearing) “I love you” to a person for the first time felt about as terrifying as it did heart-warming. Those words put a whole new face on the relationship we had before.

What would it mean if we thought about loving God the same way? If we put as much agonizing into the first time we said to God, “I love you,” as we do about saying those words to another person? Oh man, I’m not ready for that. God is going to start expecting more from me. I’ll have to call every day, and remember to ask if God needs anything when I go to the store, and remember birthdays and anniversaries and holidays, and I’m just not sure I’m ready for that kind of commitment!

Except, it’s not necessarily up to us, which is maybe just as terrifying. God already said *I love you* on our first date, which in human terms might justifiably send us packing. That’s a whole lot of commitment and expectation, and it’s a lot to live up to.

If we love God back in the way we’re asked to, it means shifting our whole perspective. It means changing the face through which we look at the world. Because if we were to truly love God, Jesus reminds us, that means we’d have to truly love humanity too. As much as we love ourselves! And if

we struggle to love ourselves sometimes the way God loves us, how much harder is it to see God in others!

So as some of us are pulling together Halloween costumes, choosing the face with which we'll look out on the world, whether for one night or for the next year: what should go in? What would you add to your mask or your glasses, or tied around your arm like a phylactery, that would help you to see the world through your love for God?

I might choose a necklace – something clunky and loud so I can't forget it's there. I'd add a crayon, to remind me to pray; a feather for the beauty of creation; a charm saying "I am baptized!" (as Luther often screamed at his demons as they tormented him); a cup for coffee, which gives me life on a smaller scale than God does; and a Clif bar, so I'd always have something to share with someone who's hungry.

What about yours? What would help you see and be seen always through the love of God?