

The Church - An Imperfect Institution  
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I went to see a new movie on Friday night simply because its title was so close to our fall theme, “Grace Happens!” Any of you know the movie title? Yes, “Love Happens!” It’s a romantic drama about a man who is a motivational speaker but whose words are disconnected from his own life. He was saying one thing and living another. When I watched it I had to smile, not only was the title close to our theme but also the premise of the plot was identical to the main point of our text today.

In our Romans text, “Let love be genuine.” the original Greek word translated here as “genuine” literally means “without hypocrisy.” The word was often used to describe actors who hid behind masks projecting images of themselves while hiding their true identity! Paul knowing humankind spoke directly to the Romans naming a problem for them that continues to be a concern for many societies centuries later. How many of you have ever heard it said that “the church is full of hypocrites?” That’s the point! We hide behind our masks of work, or titles, or education, or money, or prestige. The masks we wear protect us but also prevent us from being in authentic, genuine relationships.

“Let love be genuine,” Paul said. Sure, great ideal but how do we do it? There are many answers to that poignant question but one I’d like us to explore is John Calvin’s. Dr. William Stacy Johnson, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, whose life’s work is studying Calvin says that Calvin’s whole theology can be summarized “in our knowing God and our knowing ourselves.” Dr. Johnson says, “For Calvin, God is not a concept, a ‘what.’ Nor is God a force, an ‘it.’ God is a personal passionate ‘who.’ It is not enough to believe in God. We must recognize and trust in God as our God. To put it another way, we need to know the character of God. When we do, we can begin to put our faith and trust in God’s grace.”<sup>1</sup> We need to know the character of God, and then we can begin to put our faith and trust in God’s grace. What is the character of God... a million attributes but one overriding character that is said in an equivocal statement in I John that we proclaimed in our call to worship: “God is love.” As the author of I John says, “we love because God first loved us.” The problem is that behind our masks not only do we keep others at a distance but we often fail to let God love us. Our independence that leads to isolation from others also leads to a distance from God.

Take the parable of the prodigal son for example. The prodigal son wants to distance himself from others, to prove to himself and others that he can make it on his own. He asks for his inheritance and then leaves behind his loved ones to live the life he wants to live. For awhile the “mask of the party man” is great. He indulges his appetite in good food and “questionable entertainment” but soon finds that apart from his family and their support, he flounders ~ he fails, to the point of starvation. He then takes off his mask, perhaps seeing for the first time his own murky reflection in the muddy water of the pig pen, and realizes that he has made terrible mistakes. So he returns home and his father welcomes him with affection, affirmation and a celebration without the mask of pretense...with the honesty of genuine love.

Parables are to teach us. Jesus told parables to teach us about God. What are we to learn from the parable of the prodigal son? This parable is also called the parable of the forgiving father and it has been called the parable of the loving parent. How is love shown in this parable? Which is more a characteristic of genuine love, when the father let the son go or when the father welcomed him back with the arms of forgiveness? Usually, the interpretation of this parable is focusing on the warm embrace of forgiveness but what about the fact that God lets us go...to live behind our masks of work, or titles, or education, or money, or prestige...that God lets us go to forge our own way...is that not genuine love. Love without the hypocrisy of force or fear...love that wells from the fountain of grace. Love that knows some may not find their way back...back to the source of love that gives life! Love that frees us to live with our masks on, hoping that someday we will look at our true reflection in the well of grace and return to the Love that keeps waiting and watching for us to know ourselves without the masks, and return to the One who knows us best and still loves us most. As Calvin's life work showed us, we are to know the character of God...that God is love, so then we can put our faith and trust in God's grace!

This is true of our relationship with God; it is also true in our relationships with others. When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus summarized the commandments this way; "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Once we take our masks off before God...letting God love us and loving God back, then we are called and challenged to take our masks off with one another. The truth is we can't love someone genuinely unless, until, we know them, and we can't know them unless, until, we take off our own masks, and they take off theirs. It's the reason the church has been accused throughout the centuries of being hypocritical. The church, our church, any church is challenged by this. We are an imperfect institution! Our culture tells us one thing...Christ tells us another. Our culture tells us to keep our masks on, saying that we will be hurt, and others don't really want to know us anyway, but Christ tells us to love one another as we love ourselves.

It's true; in taking off the masks we may be hurt. It's true; that some will never take off their masks, so if we decide to take ours off, we may feel exposed and vulnerable. It's true; that living without the mask is scary, but knowing the ultimate characteristic of God being love and knowing that perfect love casts out fear...we can dare to take the risk of letting our love be genuine.

What could that look like? We have unique opportunities right now to be the church, genuinely loving one another. In this economic time of uncertainty...there are people in our own congregation that have been let go from their jobs. I know of 14 in the last 18 months and I imagine there are more. There are employers that have had to make hard decisions to let people go. There are other employers that have been able to keep their employees absorbing the financial consequences themselves. There are a couple of people who have lost their homes. There are some who have had relatives, parents or children, move back in with them. There are many who are working more hours for less money.

Then apart from for economy there is "life as usual"...people facing the challenges of growing old. People who are dealing with the stresses of raising young children or teens; children and

teens who are struggling to grow up in a rapidly changing, often confusing world. There are people living with dying and people living with grief over those who have died. And all of these stresses put strains on relationships, and those strains can become bigger masks that we hide our true selves behind. But we have a choice...even though we may not do it perfectly...we have a choice to take our masks off and to know and be known in genuine ways...so that church doesn't reflect the culture...rather the church, we transform the culture by living in a genuine way...a way of knowing one another, a way of loving one another with mutual affection!

The movie I saw, "Love Happens," didn't get good reviews because the critics thought it should have been a simple love story, when what it reflected was that love happens when we take down our masks and work at it. Love happens through hurt, through the risks, through the mystery of taking off our masks and being genuine with others and with God. Love happens when we put our faith and trust in God's grace. Love happens because Grace Happens! Amen!

1. Johnson, William Stacy. John Calvin, Reformer for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Westminster John Knox Press 2009