***Authenticity: Me Being Me***

A Sermon Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church, Sept 22, 2019

Sermon Text: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Rev. John Suk, PhD

 We express it one hundred and one ways. We all want to *be real*. We don’t want to be two-faced. We want to be *true to ourselves*, rather than to what BMW or Canada Goose or Kim Kardashian suggests we should be true to. We want to be *inner directed*. We want to make our *souls visible* to all. I want to be me. *Authentic*.

 I tried that once.

 I was fifteen or sixteen years old, selling Fuller Brush products door-to-door and doing quite well at it. My parents were spending big bucks to send us kids—five of us—to a parochial Christian school. When they realized I was making real money they decided it was time I bought my own clothes.

 I agreed. Now, for the first time in my life, I would be able to buy clothes that would reveal the real me, my authentic self, my cool and edgy and stylish self, rather than the boring me my mother dressed. So, I walked over to the Biway warehouse store in an abandoned industrial park. Biway sold overstocks on decidedly-not name-brand clothing.

 I bought a gold velour pair of pants with brass pocket rivets. I bought a loud pink shirt long before real men wore pink. I bought an orange and purple sweater. I added a choker chain that I made from hippy beads and went to school.

 It wasn’t that my mother did not warn me. My sisters—much younger than me—stared. And I noticed that my brother—the real fashionista in our family—just smiled knowingly and shook his head. And so, I went to school. The real me. My authentic self. Finally.

 It did not go well.

 Pointing, whispering, and laughter followed. I was thoroughly embarrassed. Yet, all these years later, I realize that I did go to school, that day, as the real me, true to myself. You see, as I discovered at the optometrist’s office, soon after, that the real me, my authentic self, was very, very color-blind.

 Most of us want—up to a point, as my little story reveals—we want to be true to ourselves. An important contemporary Canadian philosopher, McGill University’s Charles Taylor, has even written a book about this desire, *The Age of Authenticity*. Taylor argues that authenticity is one of the defining values in today’s culture, and on the whole, that is a good thing.

 But, philosophers actually began talking about authenticity a long time ago.

 For example, Rousseau, the Romantic, was the first to argue that we should avoid letting others define us. He said suppressing who we really are, deep inside, would lead to self-alienation and unhappiness.

 Hegel argued that if we succumbed to society’s expectation that we be conventional, good, polite people we would eventually be subjected to coercive social power that would squash our individuality.

 More recently, another French scholar, Foucault, has argued that even though it is nearly impossible, we must engage in honest and deep introspection if we are to find and confront our true selves. Because, suggests Foucault, we tend to make up stories about who we really are, stories that please us but which may not actually be true.

 But what do you think? Do you really know yourself, in all your glory and want? Or, do you make up stories about yourself, stories that you may have even come to believe?

 Well, the answer to all these questions, I think, is yes. And no. Both. As much as we don’t want to admit it or dwell on it, we are all, deep down inside, not only good and sensible and unique and talented people, but we are all also flawed. Some flaws are hardly worth mentioning—like my color blindness, maybe. But we all harbour more serious flaws, too, flaws we don’t want to put out there in an authentic display of our true selves.

 For example, perhaps you struggle with one of the great seven deadly sins—pride or envy, sloth or anger. So, you may be too proud to admit failures at work, or that you have wronged a spouse . . . or child. You are envious of a sibling or friend who has scored where you have failed, and your envy is, as envy always is, caustic, distancing you from that person. We all have such flaws that we struggle with—avarice, gluttony, lust—and most of us hide these (authentic!) flaws from others. Authenticity is all good and well, but there is a limit. We all curate what others see of our true selves, revealing some things, hiding others.

 It is like this. A few years ago, I visited Amsterdam’s *Verzetsmuseum*—Museum of the Resistance.

 While there, I noticed a display that included a letter by a Jewish person in which she described hiding in some Dutch farmer’s attic. She said that this Dutch farmer was also deeply prejudiced. He didn’t like Jews, thought they were all cheats, and blamed most of The Netherlands’ ills on Jews. This farmer was racist.

 And yet, at the same time and at great risk to himself and his family, in spite of his ugly prejudice, he hid Jewish people on his farm for the entire length of the war. Why? The Jewish person who wrote this letter said it was because regardless of how the farmer felt about Jews, his commitment to the law of God trumped his prejudice. This farmer believed that Bible told him he must embrace the stranger and love his neighbour, no matter what he felt about his neighbour.

 Perhaps our shortcomings—or sins—are not so dramatic as this Dutch farmer’s, and perhaps the good in us is not so brave as this Dutch farmer’s courage. But I think we can all identify with the farmer’s inner struggle, with the battle between our blackface actions and our better angels. Still, few of us are authentic enough to admit such inner turmoil to others. So, for example, I am not sharing, with you, this morning, the parts of my character I am not proud of.

 The Apostle Paul understood this truth about our divided selves. And he addresses it, over and over, in his letters to the Corinthians. He speaks at length—he brags, really—about his amazing credentials as an apostle, about his courage, about his education, about his selflessness. But Paul also writes about the fact that he does not always do what he wants to do, about thorns in his flesh, about his pride, his fear, his temper, and other weaknesses.

 And the Corinthians Paul writes to are not angels either. They may have been Christians who supported the widows and visited prisoners, in jail. But they were a truculent congregation. The rich Corinthians wouldn’t eat with the poor ones. People got drunk at the Lord’s Supper—not the sort of congregation that our former minister, Dr. Bradford, would have approved of. The Corinthians fought with each other like cats and dogs. They treated the Apostle Paul unkindly. It was a mess. Paul had been thinking of visiting them, but he decided not to, because frankly, he thought it would be too painful.

 But Paul also wants to put all this unpleasantness into the past. So, he writes in today’s scripture, “If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation: everything old has passed away and everything has become new.”

 Paul is saying that if there is something deep inside of you—or even just under the surface—that is part of who you authentically are, and yet you are ashamed of it—well, says Paul, here, in this church, within Christendom, you have permission to start over. Call it following Jesus’ example. Call it forgiveness. Call it turning over a new stone. Call it being a new creation—as Paul does here—but close to the heart of Christianity is this promise, this assurance that we get to start over even as we continue to struggle with those parts of our true authentic selves that we are actually not that proud of.

 With this caveat. Regardless of who we truly are, deep down inside, not only do we get to start over when we need to; but we are invited—required, told, urged by Paul—to also extend others the same privilege. We are called, in other words, in the words of this scripture, to be ambassadors of reconciliation. That is, if this starting over thing is going to work; if the daily toll of minor slights that make up the life of a church are not to have the last word; if our forgiveness for ourselves is going to take hold in our psyches then we have to be willing to throw our lot in with everyone else who has started over, accepting and embracing them not for their past mistakes but for the new persons they choose to be.

 Authentic Christians are people of the second chance.

 In sum, on the one hand, we’re all good at insisting we want to be authentic and real. But on the other hand, we all know that at root, such claims have always been a bit of an act, a chimera, a pretending. For we all know of difficult truths about ourselves that we hide from others.

 And yet, deep within the DNA of the Christian church, there is a way out of this sort of pretending. We confess to being new creations because we recognize that there always is some old creation that has to pass away. It’s a journey and Christian theology actually has a name for it: sanctification, the effort to become more and more what we really believe we could be.

 And then, we pass the same permission to really become something new to others. Ambassadors of reconciliation. There’s no life like it.