

THE MASKS WE WEAR: REMEMBERING OUR DIVINITY

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Well, good evening again, everyone! So, Halloween -- just a couple days away ... Happy Halloween week! Anyone: who liked Halloween as a child? Who likes Halloween as an adult? About the same people.

[Congregants laugh] Okay; that's interesting.

See, I had anxiety about Halloween as a child because about what to wear. I had anxiety today about what to wear; let's just be honest, okay? [Congregants laugh] But I think it was because when I was in -- I guess it was 2nd grade -- I got teased because, you know, this is the 70s. And they just started coming out with those boxed costumes. It was just a plastic sheet, basically, and a really terrible mask. When you look back, they look scary, even though it wasn't supposed to be scary. And I thought it was cool!

But I got to school and, of course, in those days, everyone had homemade outfits. And I got teased. And so, I remember coming home, and my grandmother was like, *"I got you, girl; don't worry!"* Because she was an amazing seamstress. So, the next year, she made me this beautiful Batgirl costume. I mean, it was amazing! She and my mom made this sequined mask ...

And I went to school feeling amazing and great about my costume this year. And then one of the boys teased me that I look cross-eyed in my mask. [Congregants moan] I know. That's why I didn't like Halloween anymore. [Laughs]

So, it wasn't until I had children that I started to embrace Halloween again. And I found that it could be fun to dress up and be someone or something that you normally are not. And, of course, in Halloween, masks are a big part of Halloween. They cover our face. They cover our true identity. So, we can pretend to be someone or something else.

And I find that we do this many times on a regular basis, metaphorically speaking. Don't we? We tend to hide who we are. We hide behind our masks and our costumes that we put on ourselves. We hide behind the false belief that we're not enough: that we're not good enough; that we're not smart enough; we're not pretty enough. We're not enough. We hide because we want to be liked. We hide because we want people to agree with us. We hide because we're afraid of getting criticized or shamed.

And yet these false belief -- these protective reactions: the masks, the costumes we wear in our daily lives -- we use them to cover up to keep us safe. But really what they do is they betray who we really are.

The spiritual truth is that we're expressions of the Divine. We're expressions of God Life. Our true nature is divine essence.

I just heard this great podcast. It was Ram Dass with Oprah. Ram Dass -- that wasn't his original name. He actually started as a scientist. He was one of the original scientists -- late 50s, early 60s -- who was looking at psychedelics as a way to treat depression and anxiety. And, of course, that got shut down real quick. And so, he went to India to study in India. And that's really where his spirituality came to be.

And he said to Oprah ... He said, my deepest spiritual realization -- it wasn't drugs. What he realized in his spiritual journey, particularly in India -- he said it was this: *"That I am loving awareness."* I am loving awareness.

And that's true for all of us! Say that with me: [with congregants] *"I am loving awareness."*

Let's say it again: [with congregants] *"I am loving awareness."*

Just say it softly: [with congregants] *"I am loving awareness."*

That's who you really are! That's the truth you are.

So how do we remind ourselves of who we really are when we're feeling insecure, depressed, or lost, or like we want to hide? It takes embracing our Truth by stepping into our whole self with courage. Having that spiritual strength to really embrace who we truly are and not to hide who we truly are.

So, I thought I would share ... I thought I'd look at the Bible -- a couple Bible stories -- that illustrate authenticity and the journey of really claiming our divine nature.

And the first one I came across that I was thinking of was David and Goliath. Now, God told Samuel ... Samuel was a prophet, a priest, a judge. And he played a key role in guiding Israel through a time of transition. So, God is speaking to Samuel and he says, *"Go to Bethlehem and go see this man named Jesse. And one of his sons will be the next king."*

So, Samuel goes and he gets there and there's these seven sons and they're all very handsome and they've all got these great bodies. And Samuel's thinking, *"Yep; one of these are the next king!"* But then he hears the voice of God say that God does not judge the way people do: *"Do not look at the face but into the heart."*

Do not look at the face but into the heart. It's the first lesson in this story for us: to look past the way a person looks and look to the heart. And that includes for ourselves: to look past the way we look and what's going on with the heart. What is most important is the loving awareness that we bring to our interactions with others and our life experience.

So, then Samuel asked Jesse -- because he says, *"Well, these aren't the ones. I'm looking for someone with heart. They're the brawn. Where's the heart?"* So, he says, *"Jesse, do you have any other sons?"*

And he said, *"Yes, my youngest son; he's a shepherd out in the fields."* Here we have a shepherd again. So, we have a young shepherd out in the fields. He's looking after all the sheep. Not some of the sheep; he's looking after all of the sheep. He's a small boy, but he's got heart. So he comes, and right away Samuel realizes, *"Yes."* And so he anoints him the next king of the Israelites.

Now, before he gets to grow up to do that, we jump a little bit ahead, and we have the Philistines. And they are ready to go to battle with the Israelites. And King Saul is trying to get the Israelites, you know ... They're fighting one another, and he's trying to figure out what to do here when a giant Goliath appears. And he starts to goad King Saul, and he says, *"Just send your best guy. Let me and your best guy -- we'll just fight it out, and we'll decide this battle right here."*

Now, David -- the shepherd with the heart -- he's there because he's just providing food for his brothers who are there as part of the military. He's there feeding everyone. He's there with his heart. But he hears this and he says, *"I'll fight the giant."*

Well, before he does that, King Saul sees this little boy. He says, *"You're only a boy"* and he offers him his armor. *"Take my armor as protection to protect you from this big scary being."* Now really hear that, right? The armor to protect you from this fear, this big scary thing in front of you.

But David quickly realizes, *"I cannot go in these, for I am not used to them."* He takes off the armor, because it doesn't feel right for him. And he steps forward just as he is: a shepherd boy with a sling and a rock and his faith is God, he says, and his good heart. In other words, he refuses to wear a costume that doesn't fit his soul. He refuses to wear a costume that is not who he really is. He's not a military man; that's not his authentic self. The armor doesn't fit who he is.

It's when he approaches the situation exactly who he is that he kills this big, giant, fearful being in front of him. He overrides fear and takes down the big obstacle by being himself.

And yet, often we wear protective armor. We take on personalities and roles, expectations that hide our authenticity: who we truly are. And we do this, again, to keep ourselves feeling safe and accepted and strong. And yet, wearing these false personalities -- or putting up a wall or putting on that armor -- it just restricts us from walking on earth and living in our own truth.

So, again, David's victory -- it didn't come from pretending to be a soldier. It came from him being authentically David: the boy with a heart. He trusted the gifts within him. He trusted the unique being that he was; that he was meant to be; that he was made to be; that was already present within him. He trusted what was already inside of him and who he was.

Then there's the story of Esther. So, there's this powerful king who's ruling over India and Ethiopia, and he's very ... he's got an attitude, my friends. [Congregants laugh] He's done with one wife; he's ready for the next wife.

Now, Esther was in the king's household because Mordecai was her cousin raising her as his daughter. So, Mordecai is raising Esther as his daughter in the king's household. And since the king is looking for a new wife, Mordecai knows that Esther is very well-liked. She's a love; she's a beautiful being; she's got this fantastic personality. All of the women -- all of the household -- love her. And so, Mordecai knows the king's going to love her, as well. And as soon as the king sees her, he knows Esther's the one. She's the new wife and the new queen.

Now, to make a long story short, our very temperamental, easily enraged king gets upset with one of his chief ministers, who happens to be Jewish. So, the king decides he has to get rid of the entire Jewish population. *"This one person's Jewish. I'm upset with him. Now everyone who's Jewish must be destroyed."* Now, technically that would include Esther and her father, although the king doesn't know that.

So, the question is: does Esther risk her life to reveal her true identity as a Jewish person, but also to intercede for her people? So, Mordecai begs her. He says, *"Go to your husband; go to the king."* He says, *"it is for this purpose that you have become queen."*

And so, eventually she says, *"I'll go to the king. And if I die, I die."* She understands that she can't hide who she is anymore; that she has to step fully into her divine purpose with strength, with courage.

And so, she actually goes -- and there's this whole very creative diplomatic move that I recommend you go read. It's pretty impressive, actually. It's a little manipulative, but it's also -- it's very creative. And in the end, she convinces the king to state that the people -- the Jewish people everywhere -- will be honored and respected, thereby saving her people.

But see, she had hidden her identity and who she was for so long. And yet, it wasn't until she revealed who she truly was that saved the entire population of her people. And what I believe -- and what her father was saying -- was that she was meant to be an expression of the Divine at that time and place. But it took her stepping into and claiming her true self -- as scary as it was with the possibility that she could die -- to actually be and express God on earth. Loving awareness in action.

It takes courage to be our authentic selves. It takes courage to drop the masks, the roles and the personas and the walls that we build around ourselves. And, if you are alive right now ... I'm lookin' at all of ya! [Congregants laugh] You're being asked to share who you are as a unique expression of the Divine that you are.

It's not easy to be authentic and honest and open and vulnerable all the time. And yet, it's what we're being asked to do and be: to show up as that loving awareness that we are. That's what's being asked of us.

Often it is past experiences that hold us back. We fail once -- we're like with me in Halloween costumes. We get teased or criticized, and we don't want to do it again. Right? There's something where then we want to hide ourselves, and we don't want to try it. We build an armor around ourselves. We don't let others see who we are; see us for who we really are.

So, when we feel ourselves not being our true self or true to ourselves; when we feel ourselves playing a role ... And we know when we're playing the role! We can feel when we're playing that role. That's when we pause and we ask ourselves: What is it that I think I'm lacking? What is it that I think I'm lacking?

Because then the follow-up question is: Is God lacking that? Is the Intelligence and Life and Love of the universe lacking that? No! Since God is faith, you're faith-filled! And therefore, you can move forward with great spiritual knowing and assurance of being the unique expression of the Divine on earth, of God on earth.

Ultimately, even Jesus embraced his divine identity. And he knew that his ministry, his miracles that he performed, started with BEing, not DOing. First, he claimed and affirmed his divine nature. His divine identity. He claimed it first. He claimed who he was, and then he took action. He claimed his divine identity first. We claim our divine identity first -- our divine nature first -- and then we take action.

Just this morning I saw an Instagram post, and this is what it said: *"Remove the 'I want you to like me' sticker from your forehead and place it on the mirror where it belongs."* [Congregants murmur]

Part of the action is to love and appreciate yourself more: to really recognize all of your skills and strengths and interests that make you uniquely you. There's no mistake that you were made the way you were made. You were made exactly as you were meant to be made.

So, the lessons from the Bible stories and from Halloween remind us: trust that God -- that Divine Life, Divine Intelligence -- have created you exactly as you were meant to be for this time and place. And better yet: embrace and love yourself for that reason.

And then ask yourself: What am I still wearing in my life that no longer fits? And I'm not talking about clothing. [Congregants laugh] What am I still wearing? What am I still holding onto in my life that no longer fits me? This is not who I am! Let me step fully into who I am. And what part of my true self is ready to step forward -- unmasked, unarmored, free -- fully free to step and walk as who I truly am?

The invitation of Spirit is always towards authenticity: to live from the truth of who you are. It calls us to be strong in character, and confident in our divine identity, and move through the world with the courage to express that beautiful, one-of-a-kind manifestation of God, the Divine, that you are. That is what we're called to be and do. Because it's precisely your unique light -- your authentic self -- that is most needed in the world right now.

So, this Halloween, let's not get anxious about our costumes. Let's just enjoy the fun of putting on costumes. But also let's remember that the greater joy comes from taking off the masks and being our true selves. The Power and Presence of loving awareness shines brightest when we let our authentic selves be fully seen. And that's our lesson from Halloween, everyone. Blessings!