**Exiles: Finding Hope While Scattered**

A Series on the Book of First Peter

Message 6 – “Maskism” (1 Peter 4:1-12)

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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This past week, I discovered something about myself that’s really hard for me to admit out loud.

I’m struggling with “maskism.” I’m a “maskist.”

I’ve noticed it building inside of me for several weeks now, but this past week, when I was at the grocery store, I realized that it was consuming me on the inside, affecting my attitude, and causing me to think bad thoughts about people.

When I go out in public, I wear a mask. I have a clear agenda in wearing my mask – and that is to protect everyone else around me. I know that the mask that I wear is not going to prevent me from getting the COVID-19 virus, but I’m wearing it because I am choosing to honor others – and others don’t know if I have the virus or not. They don’t know where I’ve been or with whom I’ve been --- so they’re trusting me to wear my mask so that I don’t give to them whatever I might have.

But not everyone else wears a mask in public.

And now, when I see those mask-less people, I find myself developing a bad attitude toward them. I find myself getting angry with them. I find myself judging them – because I begin to think that they really don’t care about me. Regardless of what they believe about their right to not wear a mask, I find myself not trusting them. When I see them, I begin to wonder...

* Are they intentionally trying to put my life – and everyone else’s lives – in jeopardy?
* Are they assuming that because of who they are, no virus would dare come near them?
* Are they not aware of the impact one person’s choices can have on an entire community?

And then my thoughts move toward ...

* They must be bad people
* They must be ignorant people
* They should be kicked out of this store... “No mask, no service!”

And then I see the “half-masks” – those people who cover their mouths, but not their noses. Now, what are *they* thinking? In my attitude, I’ve now classified them along with the “mask-less” ones.

But then, this past week, it hit me. I realized that **fear and anger have the capacity to overwhelm my faith**. They have the capacity to alter my reality... and change my attitude.

I mean, what if the person without a mask...

* can’t afford one?
* Is homeless?
* Just got fired?
* Is depressed because someone they love just died?
* Is a single mom who worked a 12-hour shift and realized on the way home that she needed to pick up dinner for her kids, but completely forgot about bringing a mask?

I realized that I’m struggling with maskism.

My name is David Woolverton. I’m your pastor. And I’m a maskist.

Now, you may think that I’m mocking racism or sexism or ageism or genderism – but I’m really not trying to. While I am using a tad bit of humor (okay, sarcasm), what I’m trying to point out in all of us is that **our behavior towards others who are different, often based on fear, or anger, or hatred, can expose some very important clues about the parts of us that still need God’s healing touch** – especially those parts in us that flirt with evil.

Recently, we as a society had to face into that ever-present evil when we heard about a young African-American man named Ahmaud who went out for a run and was subsequently tracked down and murdered—just because of the color of his skin. I don’t know about you, but that’s just not acceptable to me. And it shouldn’t be to any of us. But, there are people who tried to justify Ahmaud’s murder. We do that when evil things in us are exposed---we get defensive and then we blame – all to vindicate ourselves and vilify those who are genuine victims of our abuse. And it all tells a story.

What’s it say about us?

In his first letter to Christians scattered throughout Asia Minor, the apostle Peter has been teaching us that **our witness for Jesus is more important than anything** **else** – that how we treat each other, and even how we treat those who are unkind to us, shows others who Jesus is.

So, how we love each other – and how we love those who are different from us – it all shows others who Jesus is. And it lets them know that we are His followers.

As you may remember, Peter is writing to Christians who have been struggling under opposition, oppression and persecution – especially under the reign of the Roman emperor, Nero. Peter’s letter contains his words of encouragement to those Christians to **remember who they are, why they’re here and where they’re going**. He knows that the opposition against Christians is actually going to intensify and so by chapter 4 of his letter, he writes:

*Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with*

*the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin*

(**1 Peter 4:1**).

Notice a few things about this verse. First, notice the phrase, *“arm yourselves also with the same attitude.”* Peter uses the word “**arm**.” It’s a term used for preparation – especially in military language. And it’s in the imperative tense, which means he’s giving us a command. He’s being directive. He also uses a form of the word that means that those Christians have the ability to do those preparations *themselves*. In other words, Peter’s telling them to get prepared -- in advance -- for the opposition and oppression to get worse.

What do they need to prepare? Their **attitude**. Their **mindset**. Peter’s saying that they need to put on the same attitude that Jesus had – when He suffered, innocently, at the hands of those who treated Him unjustly. What was Jesus’s attitude? – The apostle Paul addresses that in Philippians 2:6-8 when he writes that Jesus:

*did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very*

*natureof a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found*

*in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient*

*to death—even death on a cross!*

In Greek, the word Peter uses for attitude can also be translated as “thinking” or “intention.” So, Peter’s telling those early Christians (and us) that our mindset, our attitude needs to be one of humility, following in the footsteps of Jesus, especially serving one another.

In other words, for us today, it means that when I go out in public, I need to not only put on my mask, I need to put on my **attitude of intentional love**. Regardless of those whom I will meet and how prepared they are, ***I*** need to be prepared as an ambassador of hope. ***I*** need to allow my behavior – and my thoughts – to testify to the fact that Jesus has changed my life.

Remember, changed lives, change lives. That’s actually what Peter says next in verses 3 – 4:

*For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose*

*to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing*

*and detestable idolatry.****4****They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you* (**1 Peter 4:3-4**).

Often, that’s what happens, right? Jesus changes us from the inside out and those friends we used to hang out with, they just don’t get it. Sometimes they mock you or abuse you. Sometimes, the persecution that Christians face comes from “friendly fire” – from those that we thought had our backs. But in verse 5, Peter reminds us that...

*They will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living*

*and the dead* (**1 Peter 4:5**).

Peter then gets even more direct. He says in verse 7: “*The end of all things is near.*” This is actually Peter’s way of encouraging those believers. Remember in Chapter 1, Peter told them that they are to view their suffering as only “temporary” – that God would redeem it all in time. Now, he’s bringing that back as if to say, “Yes, things are going to get worse... but soon, we will see God’s plan play out.”

“*Therefore*,” Peter says in verse 7, “*be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray*.” Praying is both our attitude adjuster as well as our weapon.

And then, notice what Peter says next in verse 8 –

*Above all, love each other deeply, because* ***love covers over a***

***multitude of sins****.*

I want to draw your attention to two things here. First, Peter uses the phrase, “Above all.” Two weeks ago, I shared with you that “**love is the language of the Kingdom of God**.” We are to love each other with the kind of love that sacrifices itself for the sake of the other. If we’re not able to lead with love – especially in times when loving another is hard – then the other person is not the one with the problem, we are. As followers of Jesus, the Holy Spirit resides in us. And the Holy Spirit expresses Himself with certain characteristics. The apostle Paul calls those characteristics “*the fruit of the Spirit*” (Galatians 5): Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Each of these fruit is residential in potential waiting for us to call upon them to be used as we “*arm ourselves*” to go out into the world. WE are to be the light in the darkness. **We cannot expect those who reside in darkness to shine a light that they don’t yet have.**

Second, notice that Peter says, “*love covers over a multitude of sins*.” He doesn’t say, “love covers up a multitude of sins.” Love doesn’t cover up anything. But it does cover over. Our mask doesn’t prevent *us* from getting the COVID-19 virus. But *our* mask can prevent *others* from getting it if we are the ones that have the virus.

**Love covers over what we try to cover up.**

Like Maskism. Or racism. Or hatred of any kind. Or fear.

Love exposes brokenness -- in us and in others – to the healing light of Christ.

That’s why Peter then turns to the topic of hospitality. In verse 9, he writes: “*Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.*” Hospitality takes love up several notches. It’s about making sacrifices and space in your life – and in your attitude – for those who are different, those who are strangers, those who are in need, those who require love even though they themselves may not realize it. In other words, **hospitality is about creating space in our attitude for the stranger** – however we are defining the word “stranger.”

And for Peter, that applies both to inside the church (with other Christians) as well as outside the church. And he says that God has already uniquely equipped them to do so. In verses 10-11, he writes:

***Each of you*** *should use whatever gift you have received* ***to serve***

***others****,****as faithful stewards of God’s grace*** *in its various forms.*

*If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words*

*of God.  If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides,****so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ****. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen*

(**1 Peter 4:10-11**).

Again, let me highlight a few things here. Notice that Peter says, “**Each of you**.” Each and every person in the congregation of Jesus followers has a role to play in this movement of God’s multiplying mission. Each and every follower of Jesus has been given a unique gifting and role to play. Yes, that means you too.

And that gift is meant to be used “to serve others.” That’s part of hospitality. That’s also part of having the attitude of Jesus. That’s what submission is all about. That’s how love is expressed.

Peter also says that as we use our gifts to serve others, we are acting as “**faithful stewards of God’s grace**.” That means that all of the richness of God’s blessings that He has bestowed onto the church has been doled out to all of us -- meaning that **we are most powerful when we are united together, even as we are most effective in our witness when we’re scattered.** The ultimate goal, Peter says, is the praise of Jesus Christ.

This is now the basis for where Peter goes next in his letter. In verses 12 – 19, he draws the reader back to the suffering, to the persecution and oppression that are yet coming for those early believers.

In verse 12, he writes:

*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on*

*you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you*

(**1 Peter 4:12**).

In other words, Peter says, as a follower of Jesus, you need to **expect** that trials and persecution and oppression and opposition are going to be coming your way. If what you represent is Love, and Love exposes that which is held captive in darkness, then you better be prepared for that darkness to push back. Every time God’s love invades a territory of darkness, there will be an equal and opposite force pushing back against it.

And when it does, Peter says,

*But* ***rejoice****inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be* ***overjoyed******when his glory is revealed.****If you are insulted* ***because of the name of Christ****, you are* ***blessed****, for* ***the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you*** (**1 Peter 4:13-14**).

Look at those words --- “rejoice” – “overjoyed” – “blessed.” It’s a shift in our mindset, isn’t it? It’s not easy to rejoice and to feel blessed when everything that you have is taken from you, when it feels like your rights and privileges are being violated, when what you thought was secure is now no longer trustworthy. But Peter says, remember who you are, why you’re here, and where you’re going... and hang on... the story’s not over yet.

Peter writes in verse 17 –

*For it is time for judgment to* ***begin with God’s household****; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?* (**1 Peter 4:17**)

I could preach a whole series on just this one verse! But for now, notice that judgment, according to Peter, will begin with who? – with the Church – with those of us who have heard the Word of God, who have chosen to confess Jesus as Lord. We are going to be the ones who stand before the judgment seat of God *first*.

That means that the one who has to get his attitude adjustment first when facing a mask-less person at the grocery store is... me.

I’m a Maskist. But more importantly, I’m a child of the King, a child of the Most High God. I’m a follower of Jesus – a life that has been forever changed by the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

If all of that is true – and I know it is – then I need to ask the Holy Spirit to increase His love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in me. When I put on my mask to go out, I need to put on the heart of Christ as well. Will you pray with me...