

The Masks We Wear
The Gospel Goes to Broadway: Phantom of the Opera
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Matthew 23:1-12, 23

Phantom of the Opera is a most successful entertainment product in history, grossing over 6 billion dollars worldwide. It's also the longest running musical in the history of Broadway, with over 10,000 shows, far surpassing all others.

But the success of the musical would have astounded Gaston Leroux, the writer of the 1910 French novel of the same name because his book didn't sell well. Leroux based his novel on some mysterious events that occurred in the Paris Opera House (which is a real place). Critics didn't give it very good reviews.

Phantom's central plot revolves around a beautiful soprano, Christine Daaé, who becomes the obsession of a mysterious, disfigured musical genius living in the subterranean lair beneath the Paris Opéra House.

In Leroux's original novel, the Phantom's name is Erik. As you may already know, Erik was born with deformed facial features. His father left the family even before seeing the child. And Erik's mother abused him. When he was a boy he ran away and joined a bunch of travelers, carnival folk. He made his living as an attraction in freak shows. While living in this carnival he also became an expert magician, illusionist, and of course, an expert musician. As he gets older, Erik becomes more and more bitter and angry, and he starts to wear a mask to cover his appearance.

Before we go much further, I need to acknowledge the elephant among us, as we consider this particular musical during a global pandemic. The masks we wear today in public are necessary for the health and welfare of one another. It would be easier for all of us to think of them as a merely a symbol had we chosen to celebrate Phantom last summer! Instead, here we are, with all the baggage mask-wearing carries today. I'm not quite sure what to do with all of that except acknowledge it and encourage you to continue to wear your mask until this public health crisis is abated.

In today's gospel reading, the writer of the Gospel of Matthew says that Jesus was upset with the scribes and pharisees, he called them hypocrites. The Greek word for hypocrite means actor – one who wears a mask. He is upset because they are pretending to be something they are not: they are not being authentic.

You know it can be really challenging for us to be authentic. It's really easy for us to pretend to be someone that we're not. We can become so good at it, that it becomes a habit. We may want to be authentic but fear creeps in: fear of rejection, fear of abandonment, fear of messing up or losing the ones we love. We try to protect ourselves and cover up, we move away from who we really are.

One of the keys to living a meaningful, fulfilling life is being yourself, being authentic. And to live authentically its important to identify and experience the places of pain and struggle in our lives. Those places in our past where we got hurt, and where we struggled so intensely that it affects the way we are living out our lives in the here and now.

In the book of Acts, we read that Paul was on his way to Damascus "*breathing threats of murder*". His mission was to find anyone who was a follower of this upstart named Jesus so he could capture them and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial. He was a man ruled by anger and meanness of spirit.

The story Paul would later tell is that he was interrupted on the way by a dramatic experience. A power swept over him, with a light that was so bright it blinded him, and he fell to the ground and heard a voice say "*Saul, why are you persecuting me?*"

This was the defining moment in Paul's life. With his whole self, he got in touch with his anger. He got in touch with his rage, and he got in touch with his confusion. As much as that can hurt, it's the most important thing that can happen to a person because then we learn to face our own human limitations.

Now there's a simple thing we can do, and its not easy, but it is part of the work of life and growth. It is to learn to tell your story. To share who you really are. Know that the story you tell today will be different from the one you tell ten years from now, because as you learn to get deeper inside, and closer to the place of struggle, the story will change. You will understand yourself better.

Choose wisely who you share your pain and struggle with. Don't spill it out all over the place to many different people. This is holy stuff we're talking about, sacred stuff. Tell your story to someone who is going to understand, who is going to care, and affirm you. Let it be someone who will ask good questions, to help you go deeper.

Some find it very helpful to talk to a therapist, someone who is trained to know how the mind works, how to get it to work better, how to deal with emotions, When we go to a therapist we are (in effect) saying, *"Help me tell you my story, so I can be healed."*

Sometimes we are led to share parts of our stories with people we don't know very well (maybe that's the Holy Spirit at work). When Clark and I became therapeutic foster parents three years ago we signed on with an agency that managed the cases of special needs kids, those who are categorized as academically, socially, medically, emotionally complex.

We were required to attend regular training in how to meet their needs. In one of those sessions, I sat down next to Thelma, a woman who not only raised over 30 special needs foster children, but who had adopted, at last count, a baker's dozen. Thelma is a therapeutic foster care superhero.

Normally, in these trainings, I keep to myself because I figure there are so many others in the room who know more than I. But something prompted me during break to share with Thelma my deep disappointment at not being able to reach our latest foster child, who had been removed from our care.

I shared my story with her, including all the raw details: my deep frustration with the system, how I felt about my own limitations and shortcomings and how this failure with a young man who I came to love like my own son made me want to quit and move on. I was broken.

Thelma heard me, patiently and non-judgmentally. She then shared some stories of her own, to help me feel like I wasn't alone. I left that training with a new sense of hope, and Thelma's cell number with an invitation to call anytime if I needed to talk.

It was a good lesson for me, because it helped me realize that this special connection would never had happened if I didn't muster the courage to say something real about my life.

When we are able to get in touch with these places of pain in our lives, it helps us to have more empathy for other people. When we are in touch with our own brokenness we have more compassion for other people which motivates us to take action to help and to serve. And that leads to us becoming more faithful followers of Christ, more effective instruments of healing and compassion.

Here's the key to it all... Deep down, what every single person desires more than anything is to be loved and accepted unconditionally by this power, this force, this mystery we call God – this one who created us.

And that's one reason the church community is so important, so that we can experience and tell each other the life-saving message that God loves us over and over and over again (because we've got other tapes running contrary in our mind).

The first time Cristine saw Erik without his mask, she was horrified. But towards the end of the show, there's this moment when she looks at him again without his mask and is able to have great compassion and empathy. Cristine kisses Erik on the forehead, and in the book we learn that Erik had never been kissed before in his life, not even by his mother. After he experiences this moment of grace, he frees the captured Cristine and Raul, he lets them go. The power of unconditional love is transforming, liberating, life giving.

Let us trust God, and God's love for us, so we can take down our metaphorical masks, so we can be liberated, so that we can experience the fullness of life, so that we can move from the darkness in the light. Amen.

Benediction

As worship draws to a close, the week and the world await.

Go out into the world to live and love unconditionally.

Go knowing that God is with you each and every moment of each and every day. Be blessed, and be a blessing. Amen.