

SCARY COSTUMES

When my brother was old enough to stay up past 8 o'clock, he was glued almost every Friday night to WTTV Channel 4 for *Nightmare Theater*.

Kevin would sit transfixed watching classics like *The Fly* with Vincent Price, and some not-so-classics like *The Attack of the Giant Ants*. On a rare occasion, I'd stay up with Kevin to watch a movie, but I usually couldn't make it through the opening. That's because *Nightmare Theater* had a host: Sammy Terry. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, so rather having me describe him to you, Mark Posey is going to let you see him:

(“Sammy Terry Intro” from YouTube)

Is that a great laugh or what? Forty years ago, that laugh alone could give me the be-jeebers, and I'd leave Kevin to watch his movies alone.

Last week on vacation, Kevin and I got to talking about Sammy Terry. I got on YouTube and felt the old familiar shivers as I watched that clip. But then I googled “Sammy Terry.” And guess what: Sammy Terry's real name is Bob Carter. Bob Carter – could he have had any more ordinary a name? Seeing his name and a picture of him without makeup was like the “Wizard of Oz” moment when Toto pulls back the curtain and reveals the Great and Powerful Oz is simply an ordinary, flesh and blood human hiding behind a fantastic costume.

In today's scripture, Jesus unmask the Pharisees and scribes, revealing to the people that these Jewish authorities are not as pious as the people think they are. In fact, these authorities don't practice what they preach. These men who are best-versed in the law – ordinary flesh and blood men -- masquerade in piety to hide their real desire for attention and esteem. And in unmasking the Pharisees, Jesus invites us to consider in what ways we are simply playing church instead of being the Church.

I was intrigued when I started today's lesson to notice that Jesus begins with a word of praise for the Jewish authorities. He tells the people that there is nothing wrong with the teachings of the Pharisees and elders. They faithfully speak the word of God given to Moses, handed on to Joshua, and passed down to each generation. The teachings to love God and love your neighbor are valid and right; these are the things all people should follow.

Where Jesus takes the Jewish authorities to task is that for all of their understanding and debate of the law, the authorities are not living the law. In three ways, they are serving as negative models of God.

The first inconsistency cited is that the scribes and Pharisees seemingly delight in making the demands of the Law a burden to every Jew. There were never more than 600 Pharisees at a time because in truth, to follow all 603 laws was impossible for the average person. The Pharisees don't help the people meet the expectations of the Law, nor do they feel that burden themselves. It's as if they see themselves as perfect and all others as always falling short of the perfection God wants.

I liked what William Barclay wrote in this regard in his commentary: "Here is the test of any presentation of religion. Does it ... give wings to lift a [person] up, or is it a deadweight to drag him down? Does it make it a joy or a depression? Is a man helped by his religion or haunted by it? ... Whenever religion becomes a depressing affair of burdens and prohibitions, it ceases to be true religion."¹

The second accusation Jesus makes against the Pharisees is that they make a display of their religion. Whenever he prayed, every Jewish male was to wear a little leather box on his

¹ William Barclay, "The Daily Bible Series, The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 2 (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975 revised edition), p 285.

wrist and another on his forehead. Each box, called a phylactery, had four essential scripture verses written on them, two from Exodus and two from Deuteronomy. Also when in prayer, every Jewish male wore a prayer shawl with fringe and tassels corresponding to the number of laws contained in the Old Testament. Both the boxes and shawls were intended to help the man focus his prayers on God as he prayed, surrounded by symbols of God and His promises to us.

But the Pharisees weren't satisfied with doing what the ordinary person did. They made sure their leather boxes and tassels were extra large. There was no reason for this other than to draw others' attention to them.

In the same way, the Pharisees always enjoyed the attention they received in the marketplace, and by getting the best seats at social functions and worship. When you go to an unfamiliar church for worship, where do you sit? My tip is to head to the front of the church because you don't have to worry about taking someone else's seat! No one wants the front pew of church.

In the synagogue, however, the front pew was the most honored place to be – it was also turned around so it faced the congregation. This way, the people could see all of the elders who were present, and see how they conducted themselves during worship. That's where the Pharisees liked to sit.

Jesus exposes what a hoax this is, that the Pharisees – at the very time and place they are to be worshiping God – are in fact trying to draw some of that worship upon themselves. Instead of helping the people to focus upon God as the one the one to adore, they are trying to drain some of that adoration away for themselves.

Finally, Jesus chastises all – not just the Pharisees, but all persons listening – who like to be addressed as “Rabbi” and “Father” by persons who had been their students. “Rabbi” means

teacher. “Father” was the title Elisha used for the prophet Elijah, and thus the elders were known as “fathers of faith.” In fact, the Pharisees taught that they deserved higher respect from the Jews than they would give to their own fathers. After all, biological fathers “only” gave them ordinary physical life; the Pharisees were credited with giving them eternal life.

Can you see then why Jesus objected to desiring the title? Jesus reminds us that only God deserves titles of honor and authority. When any of us seeks honor or acclaim for ourselves, we forget all that is owed to God and God alone.

And as Jesus reminds us, the God who deserves our honor and is our only authority, in turn expects us to tell the world about this God not through drawing attention to ourselves, but through service. Verse 11: “The greatest among you will be your servant.”

In 1938, 18-year-old Agnes Bojaxhiu made a vow of service to God and the church, and joined the Sisters of our Lady of Loreto convent in Calcutta. Her brother sent her a letter warning, “Do you realize that you are burying yourself?”

And Agnes responded, “You think you are so important, as an official serving the king of 2 million subjects. Well, I am an official, too, serving the King of the whole world.”

Agnes, now known as Sister Teresa, began teaching children in the slums of Calcutta. She was somewhat removed from the reality of the world by staying within the walls of the school. But she couldn’t pretend she didn’t know what was happening. India was a land ravaged by the needs of the poor which for the most part were shunned or ignored.

While on a train in 1946, Sister Teresa had a vision in which she was instructed by God to leave the convent so that she could live among and serve the poor. Soon afterwards, she began her own order of the Missionaries of Charity. As the head of this convent, Mother Teresa said their purpose was to care for “the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the crippled, the blind, the

lepers, all those people who feel unwanted, unloved, uncared for throughout society, people that have become a burden to the society and are shunned by everyone.”

She began with 13 members in Calcutta; today, the mission has more than 4,000 nuns running orphanages, hospices for the poor and victims of AIDS, and charity centers worldwide, caring for refugees, the blind, disabled, aged, alcoholics, the poor and homeless, and victims of floods, epidemics and famine.²

Among the honors bestowed on Mother Teresa was the Nobel Peace Prize. She instructed the Nobel committee to give the \$192,000 prize money to the poor in India. Despite the acclaim, Mother Teresa continued hands-on care for persons in the hospices as long as she was physically able. And when she died in 1997 at age 87, she still wore a simple sari that cost \$1.

The secular world calls for us to put on costumes and masks that reflect power, authority and wealth, and which in turn demand the world’s attention. Jesus calls us to a life of humility that strips off all of our costumes and masks, to show ourselves for who we truly are, and to seek to serve rather than to be served.

This week, may we seek to humble ourselves, that we in turn may be exalted by God.

² Information taken from Mother Teresa’s biography on Wikipedia.