

***Preface:***

Well, People of God. This is our last message in this series that's really just a bunch of things—texts, passages, principles—that I wanted to be sure to mention before Advent arrives.

And Advent arrives next week! Next Sunday. Again: For those of us who can make it, bring a mask, come today around 2, and help prepare the building for this season. It's a gift to those who use it. We'll also be setting up our outdoor Advent Candle, which was a super hit last year.

Right now we're talking about authenticity. We'll talk about potential paths to authentic living, abuses and misuses of the phrase, we'll talk about how this relates to our life together as a congregation, and our lives individually.

First, let's pray.

***Prayer:******Introduction***

So. Authenticity.

It's not an unfamiliar word, right? It's popular, actually, common: Everyone wants to be authentic or be around authentic people, to provide an authentic experience or to have an authentic experience with authentic people. Authentically.

I mean, even as consumers, we want authentic brand-

name goods, not knock-offs, right? And when someone has some item that's rare, unusual, or valuable we wonder, or even ask, "is that an authentic such-and-such."

Actually, we ask that. Maybe in a movie, or something?

### **"Real"**

What we wonder is if the thing is real or if its fake. Is it real or is it fake, that rare, valuable thing. A purse or a watch or a piece of furniture might be real, or it might be fake, right?

And beyond this, one of the most common judgments that our world is always making is whether a person is "real" or "fake."

Have you ever labeled another person as "fake?" I'm guessing most of us have at some point or another; and what we're really wishing when we do this is that the person who we're labeling would just "be real."

And what we mean when we say we want someone who is "real"--well, honestly, this is what we're talking about this morning.

Being authentic is about being "real"--it's a hard thing to define, but, as it's been said about something else, we know it when we see it, don't we?

Authentic people are real. When they show up and present themselves, you know that you're meeting who they really are, not some version of themselves that they've prepared

for you, not some imitation of themselves that's missing a few key qualities here and there, a thing that's "fake"-- whether purposely or accidentally so.

This morning we're talking about authenticity. And what that simply means is that we're talking about what it means to be real people. People who are real about who we are.

### ***A Foil:***

Howard Thurman, a theologian, once declared "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

And it's a good quote; I'd use it in a different message, probably: It's really inspirational. But I'm a little bit cautious of just tossing it out there. Because most of us don't automatically think to ourselves that if we were to "come alive," then we'd bring with us all our sin, and our troubles, and our terrors & our meanness.

When I think of myself as "coming alive," I think of myself only a lot better, which I definite in all sorts of personal ways, referenced by those I love. I am without sin, self-possessed, can run a 3 minute mile, and have a string of successful entrepreneurial ventures. I'm amazing. I am fantastic.

I will be someday; so will each of us. On the other side of the resurrection we will embody fantastic, and in the meantime we train ourselves for the life that is our destiny

by living it out as best as we're able. This is true; it's the destiny we have, which determines how we live right now.

But a desire to "come alive," usually doesn't bring to mind a desire to be ourselves; it brings to mind a desire to be someone else. Someone who doesn't talk with their hands, and ramble on and on, and constantly bounce between dissatisfaction and euphoria...oh. Whoops. Talking about me again!

What it seems to me the world most needs is people who are comfortable being who they are, people who are aware of who they are, and are real with the rest of us about it. Authentic people, real people.

### ***The Problem:***

Because there are a thousand pressures to be inauthentic. The world positions us for schizophrenic living; we are one thing Monday through Friday, another thing on the weekends. We have work lives and home lives and faith lives and whatever persona we use online.

We're trained to compartmentalize aspects of who we are, passions we have, follies and sins, and everywhere we go--but maybe, unfortunately, especially the church--we're supposed to be anything but ourselves.

Am I right? In the church we're supposed to be nice, and never frustrated, and pleasant, and hard-working, angelic really, as though we've just woken up from heaven and stepped down to live among one another, with perfect manners and perfect breath and perfect theology.

But maybe we need reminded that Jesus came to save real people, all of us, not just the parts we want other people to see. Imagine what would happen if the only part of you that was resurrected was the part you let people see?

***Paul:***

Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians is reminding them just how much he cares for them, how he lived among them, and the type of life he lived. It's a beautiful passage that was read to us this morning.

And he says one line in it; it's just another line in this building argument about how much he loves them, but he writes "Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well."

"Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well."

I know Paul loves sharing the Gospel. It was, like, his thing. But Paul seems to imply that sharing his life with those who he met in Thessalonica was a bonus, was something he didn't even expect, something extra.

***A Principle:***

For Paul, his delight in sharing his life was borne out of love. It started there. And some of us know what that is like: If we have loved deeply, we do want to share with those we love who we are, want to be real with them, and

we drop our guards and let them in in unique ways. In fact, love makes us feel “safe,” right? Safe to share our lives with the one we love.

But it seems to me that this is a chicken & egg sort of thing: what comes first? Do we love people, and so we begin to share our lives with them? Clearly, right? But sharing your life with others--being authentic and real with others, which is what we're talking about--can help love happen.

And we need to remember that Paul is writing here to a church, not as a freshman to their girlfriend or boyfriend. He's not talking about romantic, “will you go out with me” love; he's talking about the sort of love that's always patient, always kind, never fails...we've heard of it.

I pray we've all experienced it, too.

It's the sort of love that expects nothing in return and keeps a short account and has nothing to do with sex and everything to do with a caring commitment to the good of love's object, another person.

And the more interactions I've had with people who are desperate for authentic relationships, who themselves want to be authentic, real people in what can feel like a fake world, and the more I've thought of the way Paul talks to these friends of his, loved by him, the more sure I am that the church has to be a community, where we are sharing our lives with one another.

Oh, but that's hard now, right? Shall we give it up, then? Is that what we teach the next generation? "If it's difficult, quit, because it may not be worth it."

So this has become for me a principle for living: Be as authentic as you can be. Share your life with others, with those in the church and those outside it, as much as you can. Practice being real, and avoid being fake.

### ***A Position:***

And strengthening this is another conviction that you may not have, but I'd like us all to at least think about it.

I've pretty much taken the position that the only thing I have to offer another person is myself. The only thing I have to offer another person is myself. Myself used by God, of course. Formed by the Spirit and shaped by scripture, but nonetheless: Me, myself, and I.

It's all I've got. It's all anyone of us has to offer each other.

I think that each of us is like Samuel, saying "Here I am, Lord." Like Isaiah, who says the same "Here am I, Lord." All we have to respond to in this life is ourselves, saturated in grace, and trusting that "all things work together for our good" if we can continue to hold fast to our love for God.

With all my errors and sin and problems and strengths—quite a few of each of them—all I have to offer is me, their sum total, and their sum total made more by the grace that won't fail me. This is what I've got. And as corny as it is, and it is so corny: there's only of me. There's only one

of each of us. It makes sense to me that God wants to use me, as I am, in this world.

### ***Can't & Can:***

And here's what I can't do this morning. I can't address all the stuff that sets us up to do everything we can to hide from one another. I can't address the mess that keeps us from being authentic, being real--sometimes even to ourselves, right?

There are places where it is unsafe to be yourself. The Church has been one of them. It's something to lament. It's something to repent of. It's something we each of us have to reject, and say that we're committed to being safe, not threatening; to love, not despise, and honor rather than shame. But, I can only plead that we'll be the way we ought to be, and that those of us who can offer ourselves to others are the ones who shape the character of the Church more than those who fear being known.

What we can do right now is look at a few things that we need to keep in mind if we're going to try to be authentic people, people who share our lives with one another.

### ***First: A Right Self-View***

We have to stop thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought. We have to practice humility.

Humility is like a gateway virtue; it sets us up for more and greater faithfulness in all sorts of areas. Here's what humility does, at base; it reminds us that we haven't saved ourselves. No one muscles their way into the

Kingdom of God; and if it weren't for the grace of God on our behalf, we wouldn't be talking about any of this stuff. This is common denominator information; each of us share this, that we are the recipients of grace.

And further, humility, practiced long enough, can help us own the fact that any one of us, at any given moment, if we're set up with the right mix of insecurity and neediness and temptation and pride could, at any moment, do a thing we think right now we'd never do. Humility reminds us of our own capability to sin & the grace that covers us.

And for those of us on the other side of things, who are not so much humble as totally disbelieving we can ever do good, who think we're more or less lowly worms, barely tolerable to anyone, much less God, well: We've got to stop that, too.

God loves you. There may in fact be opportunity for humility here, too: The humility to accept the truth about what God says about you. And I think that I, too, have the Spirit of God.

So let's stop with pride, and stop with self-loathing.

### ***Next: Who's Voice?***

And we have to drop the belief that what other people think about who we are matters. This is the basic lesson we tell kids, right? "It doesn't matter what anyone thinks about you, I love you." Well, it's good. It's the lesson we ought to be offering, I think.

We train our children to orient themselves to God's perspective of them, not other people's. Paul says this to the Corinthians:

*"I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God."*

We need to remember that it is God's perspective that matters, and drop the perspectives of others that we cling and hold onto.

***Finally:***

Our dogs will find a thing—flip-flops, the leg of our credenza last week, rarely toys—and they will gnaw at it, gnaw and gnaw and stare off into space. We have to do the same thing with God's love for us. They lean in. They gnaw at something the way we have to gnaw at the truth that God loves us. The old word for this was worry, and we've stolen it to talk about that terrible trap of mental thinking. But we need to worry God's love for us, too.

We have to stop thinking that we have either earned God's favor upon us or aren't worth God's time. We have to let go of our dependency on other people's appraisals of us. And we have to lean into, gnaw, worry, meditate upon God's love for us so much that it comes our life's bedrock.

We are sinners saved by the grace of a God who loves us.

And everyone of us has that in common. And this is so, so important.

***Foundation:***

Because if I can believe that at the end of the day, at the beginning of the day, and all through out it, you and me, we're foundationally equal, I can begin to turn down the volume on all those other scripts that play in my head. Those scripts that say that I am less than you or I am better than you, that my perspective isn't as important as yours or more important. That in the eyes of God we are of different rank. It's not true; we are both and all children of God and will inherit together the earth and resurrection.

If I can silence those scripts, and accept that you and me? We're equals? And if you can do it, too?

Then we can meet each other. Two works of art alive in the grace of a God who loves us both equally. And really owning the fact that you are equals with another person is a foundational key, critical key, to being able to live authentically and real around them. And guess what? This is true regardless of whether they realize you're equals or not.

Because when we know that God loves us we can finally begin to have nothing to prove. What the other person believes about us doesn't matter. We have nothing to lose by being ourselves in front of them. We have nothing to gain by what the other person believes about us. We're

free to be ourselves. Nothing can take away from us the truth that God loves us.

We cannot be authentic, real with who we are, if our identity is tied tightly to other people's perceptions of us. I can't share weakness with you if I need you to think I'm strong. I can't share my strength with you if I'm scared you'll fear it. I can't bless you if I need your failure to make me feel special.

### ***Observations: Provisional Identity***

But we need to remember something:

Again, what what is most basic about us is permanent: God loves us. This doesn't change. But...we do, right? I'm not the person I was ten years ago or, gosh, 20 months ago. And ten years from now, although I'm sure I'll still make the same lame jokes, I know that my perspectives and attitudes will likely change. In part, I intend to have those conversations we talked about last week, the ones that risk conversion in my thinking about the world. But just basically: Who we are right now is in some sense provisional. It's not finished.

We await Jesus' return for that stuff. Right now we grow and change. This is a blessing: It provides depth to our relationships, and as we share our lives with each other over time, we get to take part in the ongoing discoveries that each of us is making about who we most truly are.

We can only authentically present ourselves to one another as deeply as we are aware of who we ourselves

are. And that knowledge is provisional. Who we are changes as time moves forward, and while we may stall out now and again, get in a rut, we should pray that we never think we've fully arrived. We don't fully arrive until we've overcome death.

### ***Observations: A One Way Street***

But all this takes work, you know? And some people just don't want to put in the work. And so I think it's worth noting: I don't think that Authenticity is a two way street. Living authentically, being real: there is no guarantee that if we do that, live this way, people will respond in kind.

We wish they would. We wish that when we shared our lives with other people—other church people especially—they would share their lives back with us.

But this is not a given and we can't expect it. Again, our motivation to live authentic lives can't be so that we get other people to live authentic lives. That's soft manipulation. We need to live authentic lives because other human beings, Christian or not, need to see the safety and power that comes when we know that God who is love, loves us.

Now: Authenticity breeds authenticity. Nothing is more refreshing than moments with someone who is comfortable and expressive about who they are. It's inspiring. And disclosure often echoes disclosure.

But if we wait for external things to be just right in order for us to lead authentic lives in the church, then we'll

never lead them. It would be like waiting for oncoming traffic on a one-way street.

And again, to our shame, when we've become an unsafe people, it is only wise that those who fear their authenticity is a liability hide.

### ***Warning: Hypocrisy***

And again: If we're people in process, people who are only living out our provisional selves, doing our best to become more like Jesus, it stands to reason that we'll be inconsistent now and again. It means that we won't be perfect...and unfortunately, for us, perfect is often shorthand in our minds for unchanging.

This life is one long journey that prepares us for what it will be like to live in a world where everyone is really authentic, and truly themselves. On the way we are not going to be unchanging, ever-consistent people, no matter how saintly we are. Our perspectives--our sensibilities--may change, and if those perspectives & sensibilities are public, we may find ourselves charged with being hypocrites.

All we can do, of course, is to model compassion and love and all the things that we want to be met with when we're striving to be real with others. All we can do is confess and repent of our failures. We only ever have power over our own selves. And that leads me to this:

### ***Conclusion:***

Living authentically, being real, sharing our lives with one

another--we can never allow it to become an excuse or a justification for dysfunctional behavior or sin.

We can't be jerks and say, "Hey, I'm just trying to be me. I'm a big Christian jerk!"

We can't say, "I'm authentically lusting right now, I think I'll go have some smut time. I'm just being me!"

Our attempts to be real must coincide with the bigger call in our lives which is to become like Jesus and to position others for the same. We are not free to do whatever we want in the pursuit of being true to ourselves. For us, we've got to be true to the Lord, the rightful king of the kingdom we're a part of.

And this kingdom, it's big enough for all of us.

There is nothing more refreshing than being in the company of a person who knows who they are, and is okay with it...and at the same time, is working to become more like the Lord that gives them their confidence and their freedom.

Some of us are that person, and we should praise the Lord for it, and talk about it more with the humility and gratitude that characterizes us. Some of us are miles away from that, and what we need most is a witness to an authentic life, just so that we can remember that it's not impossible.

What does it mean to be real? What would it really take for

me to live an authentic life?

It might be the rarest thing in the whole world, and one of the most powerful witnesses to God's secure, safe love. It's worth pursuing. I hope we all can.