

Sermon: 'Be Yourself'

20 March 2016, Cashmere Presbyterian Church Lent 6 Palm Sunday
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“Be Yourself. Everyone else is already taken.” – *Oscar Wilde*

“To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Sometimes I pretend to be normal but it gets boring so I go back to being me.”

“Be who you are and say what you feel
because those who mind don't matter
and those who matter don't mind.” - *Dr Seuss*

Who will Henry be? When people tell him as he grows up to 'be yourself', how will he know what this means?

I have been working through a theme this Lent, through to next Sunday, Easter Sunday. The theme is 'Who we are in Christ'. We have talked about various things that make us the people we are and are becoming ... where we come from, how we have been blessed and how we bless others, how we change, and last week, how we are created to be creative. This Sunday I want to ask this very general but I believe important question ... 'How do we be ourselves?' What does it mean to 'be yourself'?

This is something that our western culture seems to value highly, a sense of personal competence, identity, independence. We will often hear people saying this: 'Be yourself, don't give a stuff what other people think, just be who you are.'

And I struggle with this because on one hand I agree with it, and on the other hand I ... I don't know ...

If I might start by naming the problems with it ... perhaps those of you from an older generation might be clearer about this an I am, you who were brought up into a world in which serving your community was the highest ideal, rather than the modern obsession with self-fulfillment. I

suspect that 'being yourself' is a privilege of wealth; those who struggle to survive know that you only get paid when you meet the expectations of other people. I suspect that 'Be yourself and don't care what others think' contributes to our never-higher divorce rates, blended, mobile families. It promises freedom and happiness but I suspect that the search for ME identity and ME fulfillment contributes to our never-higher rates of depression and anxiety ... maybe being yourself is not all it's cracked up to be.

Maybe those old fashioned ideas have something to offer us after all, those old fashioned ideas about being part of something bigger than ME, about placing the wellbeing of others above our own, about hanging on to our commitments to other people no matter what I feel and what I want today.

So before we get too enthusiastic about encouraging Henry to find himself and be himself maybe we want to show him what community looks like, what sacrificial service to others looks like, what long-term marriage looks like. Maybe.

On the other hand, it is also true that spending your life trying to please other people and blend in with other people does not lead to happiness either.

Last week our service was about creativity, and I talked about how we have to learn to copy but creativity moves beyond copying into originality, fresh thinking, fresh looking and new ideas.

Perhaps identity works the same way. As children we learn by copying others. We shape our sense of self on the people around us.

Consciously or unconsciously we model ourselves on others, we try to be a copy. We see this of course most clearly in adolescents. I went last month to the powhiri at Cashmere High School, and looked around all the new Year 9 young people. I was gobsmacked. Almost every one of the 200 12-year old boys had almost the identical hair cut ... my son had one just the same, long on top, short round the sides and back. Sonny Bill Williams has one just like it too, you know. And almost every one of the 200 12-year-old girls in the room had almost the identical hair-cut. Long, all long, in a pony tail. Being 12 is a good time in life to copy other people, to fit in, to find your identity in belonging in a group of people who look like you.

I hated being 12 because my family had just moved to Lower Hutt after 2 years in Tonga, and I didn't know about hair cuts or swear words or

how to be a suburban teenager, and I was teased mercilessly. But I made some friends who didn't fit in either, and together we worked out how to be cool in our own way. We found some boys who didn't fit in either and we hung out in the Civil Defence storeroom, and the library, and High School life significantly improved. I eventually stopped assuming, when people laughed, that they were laughing at me! I eventually did work out who I was and how to be myself.

But I couldn't have got there without friends who I knew genuinely liked me. And I doubt I would have got there without the teaching and the personal conviction that there was a God who genuinely loved me just for who I was. That mattered to me as a young person, and it matters to me now.

The one person in the history of humanity that truly was just who he was, who was truly an original, not an attempt at a copy of anyone else ... was Jesus. How well do you know Jesus? It's Holy Week, and if I could ask one thing of you this week it would be that you sit down with your Bible and read about Jesus. Our readings in church this year are mostly from the Gospel of Luke, so that would be a great place to start. Please read Luke. It's only 35 pages in my Bible. And it is so helpful to read the whole thing start to finish, especially for Easter. Who is this man, Jesus? What kind of guy was he? Why did he have such a huge impact on the people who met him? Why are we still talking about him 2000 years later?

The little piece of his story that we hear today is what's known as the 'triumphal entry into Jerusalem'. It is a bitter-sweet story of public adulation, overshadowed by the public humiliation that we know is soon to come. Jerusalem is on a hill, Mt Zion, and the city was protected by a wall. Jesus had walked up that road and in at that gate many times in his life, carried as a small baby, running up with the other boys, coming as an adult for festivals, and with friends and disciples. This time was different. This particular day he was expected, eagerly looked for. This time he was a celebrity, the subject of rumours, whispers, shouts of anticipation. This time the hopes of his people were being thrown onto him. How they longed for a saviour! How they longed for freedom from the oppressors. O for a Messiah!!

Any other man would have either run a mile, or grasped the glory of the moment for himself. But this man set his own agenda. This man alone knew who he was and where he came from and where he was going. The source of his identity was not in the crowds, not with his closest

friends, not with his birth family, not even with his nation or culture. This man knew that he was beloved of God. And in that freedom he chose an odd thing – he chose to join in the parade but on his own terms, which were odd terms. He rode a colt, a young donkey, a very little kind of a horse, must have been very tricky to stay on, nothing grand, quite silly really. I'm sure it would have been much easier to have walked, but Jesus chose this as a his own unique statement of who he was ... in riding the donkey into Jerusalem on that day of all days he both claimed to be the Messiah and he did it in a way that didn't look at all Messiah-like. He chose to give glory back to God rather than claim it for himself. He chose to be himself.

So, Henry, as you grow ... as a boy, a pimply teenager, a man, an old man ... we hope and pray for you that you will work out for yourself what it means to be yourself. You'll try to copy other people, and we hope that the people your choose to copy are worth copying. But more than that, we hope that you will always know that you are loved simply for who you are ... by your parents, grandparents and godparents, but even more powerfully, by the living God who made you utterly unique and wonderful, to be not a copy of anyone but to be an amazing part of God's work in the world. May you, and may all of you, know yourselves to be beloved of God, and in this knowing, be yourself.