

Series: "Corona...Corona"

Sermon: "Living with One another in a Kabuki World"

Text: Philippians 2:1-11

RGJR/FBCCS/5-24-20

- Mary loves to take our granddaughter, Grey to see plays. When UCCS opened the ENT Center for the Arts near the FBC building on North Nevada Avenue, there was excitement over new theatre opportunities with many new plays produced for younger audiences.
- I have not yet attended any plays at the ENT Center but Mary and Grey, along with other family, have. They tell me the venue, that appears a bit strange to me from just the outside look, is beautiful and very functional for theater.
- The Shockley-Zalabak Theater is the largest venue and it seats 750. The Chapman Foundation Recital Hall is built for good sound and seats about 240.
- The ENT Center venue I am most interested in, and the reason for this introductory tour, is the interestingly named "Dusty Loo Bon Vivant Theater" that seats up to 300 hundred people but is often configured in ways that reduce that number.
- The Dusty Loo Bon Vivant Theater is what is sometimes called a "black box theater." The staging, seating, lighting and all the rest, are flexible. They can be moved into many different configurations around the space. The floor is equipped with tunnels and trap doors so that characters in a play can enter a scene from a variety of locations.
- There is no consistent stage left and stage right, in the conventional sense, because the audience is placed in the middle of the action with characters entering and exiting all over the room.
- Most of the time, in this sort of theater, there is no obvious 4<sup>th</sup> wall to break. So, in the presentation of "A Christmas Carol," Scrooge got right in Grey's face and asked her, "*Do you believe me?*" When our son Brandon attended with the family theater-goers, Phileas Fogg, argued with him personally that, like all *normal* men, Brandon must

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have owned a balloon that could circle the earth. When he didn't get the reply he wanted Phileas tore up a ticket for his balloon ride and threw it in the faces of those around Brandon.

- Black box theater is theater that brings the audience into the play—makes those watching become part of the action. I've never paid to participate in a black box play. When they do "Apollo 13," I may go as long as they let me be in the capsule with the astronauts.
- However, I do sometimes feel like I have been part of black box theater in life. I label these real-life experiences, "**Kabuki Theater**" because, culturally, that has come to mean an event characterized more by showmanship than the reality of content. Kabuki theater is a play put on around me that isn't real.
- Please forgive me if you disagree. Prior to the handling of the current Corona virus scientists and officials, my best example of real-life Kabuki theater was going through security at the airport post 9-11.
- If you flew much before 9-11 and the advent of the TSA and all the regulations, you know flying was a much different, and potentially even enjoyable, experience. I would no longer call it enjoyable although I remind myself throughout the process that it is still easier than crossing the continent in a covered wagon.
- There are some studies and reports of testing that make me believe going through the TSA checkpoint at DIA—either end of the terminal—is really Kabuki theater. A play without substance—without much reality. I'm pulled into the showmanship of the play so that I and others around me might feel safer as we fly.
- I could regale you with the stories that now make me a bad air-traveling companion. Mary dreads it when we hit TSA even with TSA-PRE access that is supposed to make it easier. I hate being dragged

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into what I perceive as governmental Kabuki theater in real life. It can even make me angry.

- No matter what I wear, no matter what line I am in, at DIA, I always—whether in a thinner or fatter stage of life—get hand-searched after going through the scatter machine—ALWAYS! I finally got an agent to slip and admit the machine algorithm, now in use to present a Kabuki form of modesty, doesn't like the shape of the surgical scar left from when my appendix ruptured. It's being marked like Harry Potter only in a different place.
- Ok, no really big deal says Mary but some agents are not as circumspect as others in how they validate the safety of that yellow-square marked area of my body on their screen. All the while, in order to fly, I must pay the extortion-price of having a man publicly grope me. I've learned not to complain unless I have lots of time to kill before my flight. Part of the kabuki theater is the maintenance of a frightening authority by people in uniforms who don't like questions.
- The last time we travelled, an agent brusquely asked the lady behind us, who was utilizing metal crutches with arm braces to move herself through the airport on permanently damaged legs, "*Do you need those to walk??!!*" It took all the self-control I had left not to answer him: "*Nah, she just likes the way they look with her dress!*"
- "*OK Raleigh, enough venting!*" Well, the joke is on you. As much as it seemed like venting (maybe a little was) I am just setting you up. I am setting you up for thinking a thought that we humans don't like to think--so maybe that is why we don't often think it.
- Much of the world in which we live for God—the world in which he has placed us to be creatures who *image* his glorious righteousness and raise his *NAME* as the only name worthy of faith and worship—

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much of this world is just "Kabuki theater"—it's about showmanship not about reality.

- It's about the human wisdom of pragmatism having eaten from the forbidden tree rather than God's true wisdom which he was willing to share in his good way with the human creatures he made. It's about rationalization rather than truth.
- It is about acting like we are little gods instead of acknowledging the One CREATOR GOD. It is about autonomous control and gaining personal significance rather than submitting to the gracious gift of LIFE from its only source, Jesus Christ the LIFE-giver.
- To look at it one way, the worldwide outbreak of Covid-19 has simply added another *black box venue*—another "Dusty Loo Bon Vivant Theater" for the world, and maybe even for us believers, to get caught up in the *showmanship* versus the *reality* we know is true from God's Word.
- My young granddaughter Grey, is, for the moment, caught up in what seems to be the very *real* presence of Ebenezer Scrooge. However, when the house-lights come on and she leaves the theater, even she eventually realizes the un-reality—the kabuki-ness.
- I was listening again to a reading of C.S Lewis' "*The Great Divorce*" and only got so far as his added introduction explaining that he was not trying to describe the biblical realities of heaven or hell. He wasn't writing theology but rather metaphor to wake people up from the world's Kabuki theater (my term not his).
- He meant to turn the house-lights back on so God's reality would become visible to Christians among the play-acting showmanship of the world's black box theater.
- He spoke of houses seeming so real but being so fake they couldn't protect their occupants from anything and raindrops so real that

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when they fell they simply passed through all the world's illusions of kabuki theater realities.

- He made it clear that, ultimately the two—the illusions and the reality--are *absolutely* unlike—*absolutely* two different categories not lesser and greater things on the same spectrum.
- You may not catch all of that the first time through. I certainly haven't, so I have read or listened to Lewis' words again and again.
- I make myself do it, because, like most humans, even after being born again to new LIFE, I often prefer the comfort of the Kabuki I know over living a faith-in-God-life that takes away my self-produced sense of control and personal value apart from God.
- That faith-life asks me to risk trusting that the God of the Bible is a whole different—**REAL**—than the black box theater going on all the time everywhere around me.
- Like I sometimes do, especially when going through TSA at DIA, I know believers right now who are "*raging against the machine.*" They believe their own brains are smart enough and their energized anger is powerful enough to change the kabuki-world.
- They are going to fight, with all their might people who disagree with them over the loss of their perceived rights and against calls to compromise the way they choose to live in the kabuki-world of responses to Covid-19.
- They are certain that, better than anyone else they know reality and they are going to respond—no matter its impact on others—with dogmatic certainty on the basis of what they know for sure.
- They are certain they have cut through the *kabuki* of the politics and the vacillating "science" and sometimes even what they perceive (usually by "special revelation" to them personally) the bad theology of being Jesus' church these days.

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- I won't try to say it all this morning and hopefully, soon, I will be able to say more face to face (even if we cover part of our faces). What do I want to say? Rights, fears, traditions, presidents/governors, scientists, doctors, experts, politicians, angry church members and even crusading pastors, who have ostensibly heard from God, don't determine reality in any Kabuki theater in this world. ONLY God's Word does.
- So, here is the first bit of REAL reality I want to share with you this day. It is the reality that I personally have been pointed to time and time again these days when I have tried to turn the houselights on and stop the Kabuki theater myself.
- It is now the normal place to start for me and I think it is that for all of us in how to live in a kabuki theatre world. For some of us, sadly, it does not begin with being a powerful crusader who knows best with such certainty that they can fix all things if others will only do what is certainly *right* in this person's thinking.....
- In my estimation, if any New Testament church was "being the church" Jesus desired, at least in some ways, it was the church of Philippi.
- Still, this church was not without its problems. It is no small thing that the Apostle Paul "*unmasked*" for all eternity the names of two leading women in the church who were not getting along—*Euodia* and *Syntyche*.
- Just as the selfish treatment of one another connected with what the *Corinthian* church tried to pass off as celebrating the Lord's Supper prevented that church from being and doing what it was meant to be and to do, while meeting together, so too this argument between these two women was critical to the church truly being Jesus church in Philippi.

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- In other words, contrary to what some politicians, theologians and Christians believe these days, simply meeting together on Sunday in a building and doing spiritual-looking stuff is not what constitutes being Jesus' church.
- If the Corinthians met and displayed selfishness and disunity and called it "church," it would be better if they didn't meet, says Paul. If they could not meet together and display the reality of the unified body of Christ, it would be better if they just ate in their own homes.
- If Euodia and Syntyche cannot come together in love around the unity that they have in Christ, especially in their case by thinking the best rather than the worst of each other, then the church in Philippi eventually will not be displaying the REALITY of the body of Christ it exists to display.
- "Church" is not made up of doing the same stuff together in the same place at the same time. Church is exhibiting the unity that ***already exists*** among believers who maybe even have different opinions of how to live in a *kabuki* theater world.
- We don't produce that supernatural unity or *koinonia* of the Spirit. We are born into that reality—each and every one of us is, when we are born again. Just as certain as having the "home in heaven" that folks like to claim when they trust Jesus, they are also as certainly made part of the body of Christ when they trust him.
- ***Being the church is living out that reality—modeling the body of Christ to one another and the world her loves and wants to redeem.***
- Having "church," as we have come to think of our Sunday activities, is one way in which we can do that modeling meeting together and sharing in the same activities and focus.
- But sharing in the same activities is not being the "church" if, when we gather we are displaying attitudes of superiority, anger, ridicule,

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bickering, lying, passive-aggressive hiding, and even thinking the worst of one another. That last one seems to be the blemish on "being the church" brought by the two arguing, Philippian women.

- The ultimate reason for all those "*one another*" commands in Scripture to churches is not so Christians can be nice people and get along with everyone. The ultimate reason is so they can display the supernatural unity they already possess as the body of Christ.
- This, by-the-way, in the *dispensation* of the church, as we know it—all humans—Jews and Gentiles, for example—united by God in one body—Is probably the main way we are to "image God" in the world. "*By this shall people know you are my disciples; that you have love for one another.*"
- Before naming the women in his letter to the Philippian church, the Apostle Paul lays out the foundational theology of our supernatural unity in Christ. He does this using first himself as an example of one in partnership—that is *koinonia*—with these believers who does "*nothing out of selfish ambition*" but rather believes with all his heart that "to live is Christ and to die is gain."
- Reality is living all of life by and for Christ in a *kabuki*-world and dying and leaving that *kabuki* world is the ultimate release from the black box theater around him. This is not platonic escapism from the material world for Paul. This is leaving behind what the world has created in its unreal, theater production of life.
- After using himself as an example, Paul turns to the ultimate example of how to live as believers already united in the body of Christ while living in a *kabuki*-world that can produce disagreements about how to do that. The ultimate example is, of course, the Lord Jesus—God's incarnate Christ.

- Let's read the familiar example beginning at verse one of chapter 2 of the *Letter to the Philippians*.

**2**If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, <sup>2</sup> then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

<sup>5</sup> Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

<sup>6</sup>Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

<sup>7</sup>but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.

<sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!

<sup>9</sup>Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,

<sup>10</sup>that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

<sup>11</sup>and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

- Take the example of Christ Jesus section first in verse 5-11. It is about Jesus' *attitude* while dealing with other people in the *kabuki*-world he had entered. Paul is saying, "*I can't list every behavior and that wouldn't really help anyway. What I can tell you is the basic*

**attitude**—*the underlying approach that you can take for living in this world filled with lies and fakeness.*"

- That attitude is mainly a stance of **humility** even when you believe you are right but people won't laud you for that rightness—they won't give you the honor you are due for being as brilliant as you believe yourself to be.
- Jesus was always right—never wrong. *Just as God only does light-- Jesus only does **right**.*
- But, rather than demanding recognition because he was right and trying to fix the world by correcting all the kabuki because he could see it and others couldn't, Jesus did what God often does. He took a different approach—pretty much the opposite approach we might expect.
- Instead of forcing them to see he was the real "*winner*" he actually was by demanding it and destroying his opponents with his power on earth, Jesus allowed himself to look like a "*loser*," in their eyes, so that they could *win* and then see the truth of the real power of God.
- Jesus could have played their *kabuki* theater and won a *kabuki* victory but he didn't! Instead he *imaged God* by living God's way with *humility* and truly won the real victory with all the "house-lights" of reality turned all the way up and shining on it.
- The *King* humbled himself to serve the needs of *servants*—never sinfully—don't think I am saying that so you can cop out on this. Never sinfully, not as an enabler of sin, **but always self-sacrificially**, ultimately dying on a cross for those who still didn't get how he was the smartest—rightest—man in the room—actually in the world.
- That is the ultimate example of the *humility* Paul is calling for in the verses that precede the example. That is the governing attitude for

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believers being the body of Christ together—being the church in a mostly *kabuki*-world.

- In verse 1 and 2 of chapter 2 Paul reminds the Philippians of the reality of their already existing supernatural unity as the body of Christ. The "If's" are rhetorical—like rhetorical questions that he knows they will answer... "Yes, Paul, that is true. We are united in Christ. We do already have *koinonia* connection by the Spirit (the NIV translates that "fellowship" here." Yes, Paul, we have experienced yours and God's and maybe even each other's *tenderness* and *compassion* by supernatural power.
- Then Paul says, "Great! Since all this is true, let's live as if it is the reality instead of the *kabuki* around us. *Be like-minded*. That's not suggesting all have to have the same favorite food or same favorite color. It's not even suggesting that all think we ought to worship or be the church exactly the same way.
- It's certainly *not* suggesting that living through this Covid business requires that you and I agree on absolutely everything about what it is and how to live and worship in it. Some people and even some pastors think it does mean you must agree with them and, if you disagree with them, your faith or your courage or your reasoning are faulty compared to theirs. That is not the attitude Paul is validating here.
- You can tell he is speaking of the broader matter of "agreement in direction" as he speaks of having the *same love*, and *being one in spirit and purpose* (I think the NIV could have put a capital "S" there on "spirit").
- The unity Paul wants is not an absolute agreement on the particulars of life in a *kabuki* world but rather an absolute unity in living how we

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live because we really are united by the Spirit in God's love for God's purpose of displaying his glory in Jesus' Church.

- I have discovered no matter how angry I get or how much I complain and crusade—even when I am right—I rarely, if ever, win the battle against *kabuki* theater that way—fighting *kabuki* with my power and rightness—in this fake world.
- I think Paul would agree. The way we fight it is found in verses 3 and 4. Please think about these for a while after we finish here.
- He says, don't live to make your own name out of *selfish ambition*, even if you are right.
- But as he will show Jesus did, instead, **start with humility** that makes the other person more important than yourself to you even if they are wrong. "I'm **not** saying tell them they are right when they are wrong says, Paul." "Paul says, I am saying, start by asking what their need is that supersedes your need to be recognized as right and the smartest person in Home Depot at the time."
- In other words *don't just think about your own needs, your own "interests," but think about the true needs of the other person* and do that first.
- Then Paul says this was the **HUMBLE** attitude—the approach to living with people—that Jesus himself—who was always right—always the smartest man in the room—always seeing reality and not fooled by the *kabuki* theater--had when he entered this *kabuki*-filled world.
- Are we learning this Jesus-like **HUMBLE** attitude in new and deeper ways during these pandemic days? I pray we are.
- I pray this now especially because I feel the sense that we are about to gather together again for worship at 5590 N. Nevada Av. and it

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may be under circumstances that some see as *kabuki* theater and some don't.

- ***What will our dominant attitude be?*** Will it be a humble attitude that cares for the needs and even current preferences of others with whom we are united in Jesus' Body. Or, will it be with an attitude that says I am right and nothing else matters!
- According to Paul and the example of Jesus, in a *kabuki* world is it more important that I am validated in my choices or that I put the needs of others first?
- The devil will be in the details. I realize one can argue their way past everything I have said in this sermon using exceptions and "what if's."
- That's perfectly OK to me even if you think it proves me wrong theologically. The next time we meet face-to-face for what people call "church," you don't have to agree with me or my understanding of how to live during this time.
- All I ask is that we each have the same attitude as Jesus did—that we humbly each put the needs of the other first.
- If Euodia and Syntyche did that years ago, things were again fine in the church in Philippi.
- If we each do that, things will be fine in FBC.