

HIDING INSIDE PEARLS

There's something about a pearl which has always catches the imagination. Their smooth texture almost velvet to the touch, their apparently perfect symmetry which pleases aesthetically, their lustrous hues out of which our pleasure grows, all of it defies their genesis inside. A grain of sand invades the oyster, irritating the soft, delicate and vulnerable muscle tissue so that the oyster tries to smooth the edges and eliminate the discomfort. Over time, layer upon layer of protective coating is wrapped around the flaw, covering the foreign material, changing what was relatively ugly into something of beauty.

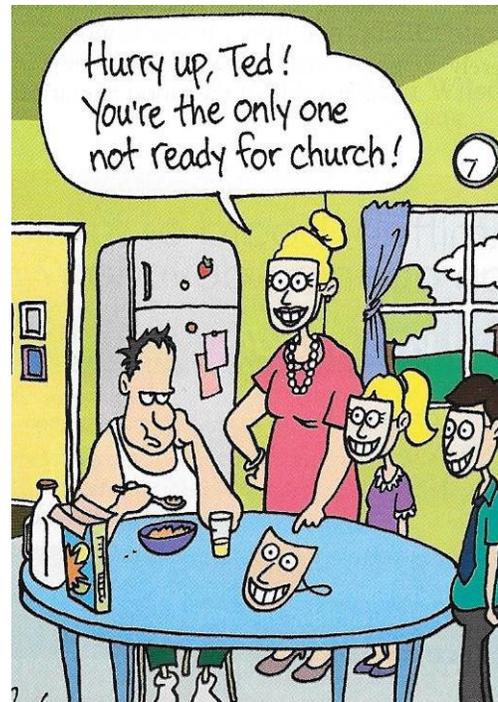


We all do it, too. We all try to hide our inner selves behind a seemingly endless parade of masks. That which lies within is something we wish to hide, for to reveal it would wound too deeply, to allow others to see our true selves would leave us far too vulnerable. We are not ready to embrace such intimacy with others. Over time, the irritation of the whole of who we are, subsides. Over time, behind our layers of protective camouflage, we become comfortable in who we are becoming. It is familiar and no longer irritating.

Although our onion layers seem to placate the terror in our hearts that we might be discovered, still the flaw inside remains. Like the pearl, it all offers a beautiful exterior. Like the pearl over time, our edges, our rawness, our brokenness, becomes more seemingly perfect: a thing of beauty. Yet no matter how much we try to ignore it, no matter how much we try to conform to the beauty of our manufactured exterior, we know what is there inside. Fear remains that somehow the elegance of who we try to portray ourselves to be will be shattered, exposing the sin within.

Now I know that sin is no longer a word used with any kind of frequency in our world. We often use phrases like, "bad choices," or "brokenness," or "flaws," but to do so is just another layer with which we try to cover up the ugliness. It isn't comfortable to say or to admit, but we all sin.

Certainly, it's easy to point to the tragedies in the world – the civil war in Yemen, the human rights abuses by far too many authoritarian governments, the seeming insurmountable control of international corporations of our economies – decrying such injustice and rampant short-sightedness. It's easy to decry the feeble and inadequate



response of the international community to the reality of human-accelerated climate change sweeping the world. We self-righteously mourn such sin and cry out with the Psalmist in Psalm 28:4, "Repay the evil ones according to their work, and according to the evil of their deeds; repay them according to the work of their hands; render them their true reward."

That feels good, but God is not our police force. We know that our deeds are repaid in consequences. For every choice we make, there is a consequence. We have to live with those consequences every day. I don't mean that a lightning bolt will flash down from the heavens to fry us to a crisp. What I mean is that we have to live with ourselves. That grain of sandy sin, supplied with the fertilizer of wrong choices, festers and grows, causing ever greater irritation and even more heroic efforts to layer that growing sin under more and more elaborate masks. If bound too tightly within such denial, the sin eventually bursts free, uglier than we could ever imagine, making us more vulnerable than we ever thought we could be, robbing our families and our friends of a healthy relationship, robbing our selves, of any kind of integrity. It is then we despair, moaning in supplication like another Psalmist in Psalm 51:3, 1a, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is every before me. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love."



Again, God doesn't do what we might expect. Regardless how awful and ugly we consider our sin to be, God's arms of loving forgiveness forever encircle us. It's not that those arms only arrive when we've hit rock bottom. Instead, it seems that we only recognize what has always been there had we but opened our hearts to God fully in the first place.

Imagine. No matter what we see in the mirror, no matter what our inner reality we try to hide from others, no matter how deeply we have hurt God by our wrong choices, by our sin, God loves us anyway. That is the gift of good news revealed in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Simon Peter, the one who denied knowing Jesus three times, became the rock, the foundation upon which the church was built. Judas, whom Jesus knew would betray him to the religious authorities, shared a dipping bowl and sat at a place of honour beside Jesus at the Last Supper. The criminal hanging beside Jesus was assured of a place in paradise, even as he died from a life of brutality and terrorist sin.

However, to nestle inside God's comforting, healing embrace requires an attitude change in us. There are three things we need to do once we recognize that healing is always ours for the asking.

First, we need to confess our sins. This is very tough, for it opens us to a state of vulnerability which seems too difficult to endure. It strips away the pearl layers to reveal the sinful grain inside. We become naked, revealed, yet it is the first step toward our healing in God's loving hands.

Second, we need to repent. Repent means to literally "turn around." It means to give up those choices and those behaviours which turn us away from God. It means we must consider every action, every decision, against the whispering of God's Spirit in our hearts. For that we must listen: in prayer, in study, in worship, in community with other believers. For that we must remain open to being changed out of our comfort zone, from behind the masking layers we previously thought necessary.

Third, we need to reconcile, to mend the relationships we have sundered through our sin. This task is one which lasts a lifetime, for we will continue to make wrong choices and continue to need to confess, to repent and to reconcile.



That's a lot of work! The consequence of such work, however, is more than worth the effort. As John of Patmos writes in the book of Revelation 21:3b-4a, 5a, "See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as their God; they will be God's peoples, and God will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes.' ...And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'"

Honest vulnerability brings an integrity of healing within God's embrace. Only then do we fulfil who we are created to be. Indeed, it is only then that we are able to fully accept the freeing gift of forgiveness – not just God's forgiveness, but our ability to forgive ourselves – that we can stop hiding the wonderful people we are becoming each day.