

Emptying Out The Theater

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When I was a young boy my church had a Christmas pageant. They had one every year and it was one of those old-time Christmas pageants that enacted the nativity story. And I participated in this pageant in non-speaking parts for years. A sheep one year. A goat another year. A camel another year. A silent wise man another year. All along patiently waiting as I ascended the elementary school years until the sixth grade when I would be given the chance for a speaking part. There were two male speaking parts -- the first was the lead shepherd who got to say, "Let us go unto Bethlehem to see this thing which the Lord has made known to us." And the second was the angel Gabriel who got to come out at the beginning of the entire production with big floppy wings strung to his back and a halo pinned to his hair and he had this rather lengthy monologue wherein he announced to Mary that she was going to have a child. It was the biggest part of the play and I wanted it. I wanted the lines, I wanted the wings, I wanted the halo. And because my father was pastor of the church I knew the part was mine. I was unaware of the word "nepotism" but I assumed its benefits in my heart and soul. Long before the role assignments I had already committed half the part to memory.

Imagine then my surprise when the part of Gabriel went to my best buddy, Danny McIlroy. I was dumbfounded. Had I not made it clear to my father that I wanted that part? Did he not understand his paternal obligation? Later I came to learn that it was precisely to avoid any charges of nepotism that the Gabriel part was steered past me and to my friend. And I was left with the shepherd's speech, "Let us go unto Bethlehem and see this thing which the Lord has made known to us." And it was with about that much enthusiasm that on that Advent Sunday afternoon I began to

recite my line, my one brief ... all too brief in my mind ... line. But as I started into my line I took note of who was watching. And it was a lot of people. A lot of people. More people than had ever before heard me say anything. So I froze. I froze in my one line. Ten minutes before Danny McIlroy recited his part like a Shakespearean actor and here I was stumbling on the fourth word of a sixteen word part. I froze for just for a second until Mr. Gillespie fed me my line and I finally stumbled along. My one big chance to stand before that great church audience and display my theatrical talent and I blew it. The audience undid me.

I want to think with you this morning about your audience. "Beware," Jesus says, "of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." "To be seen" in the Greek is the word "theathenai" from which we get our word theater. Beware, Jesus says, of what your theater is. Beware of your audience.

So I want to think with you about your audience. What audience are you playing to? Who is it that is occupying your theater?

Now my guess is that most of us if we were honest would say that there is not simply one audience before whom we perform our lives. Each of us, actually, has several audiences that we are playing to wouldn't you say? I suspect that for many, if not all of us, our lives get played out on one of those rotating stages that circles us before several galleries of people. At one point, for example, we are performing in front our employer or before our work associates. We act in a certain way as to engender the favorable response of those who sign our checks and give us our bonuses. Rotate the stage and we are now performing in front of our families: our parents, our children, our siblings, our spouse. They are watching us act our familial part and we hope beyond hope that they are satisfied with our performance. Rotate the stage and now we are acting in front of our neighbors, friends and community. The people that maybe don't know us real well but we sure want them to see us in a certain light and performing a certain part. Rotate the stage and now we are enacting a role before our church family. And they are looking to see how well we enact this discipleship part. And once again rotate the stage and we are performing before total strangers, people to whom we give little thought as to what they think of how we act.

"All the world's a stage," Shakespeare wrote, "and all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts."

Now those in the field of behavioral psychology would tell you that a whole and integrated person is a person who stays in character while rotating on the stage. That the same character and the same lines are being recited before the work crowd and the family audience and the friends group and the church family and the assorted strangers. Or to put it another way, a whole and integrated person could put all those audiences into one theater and not skip a beat or lose track of a line while staring into that sorted collection of her life's audience. It's called self-control. I know myself and I have control of myself while upon the shifting stage.

How would that be for you? How would it be for you to take all the audiences of your life and put them into one theater with all eyes staring upon you as you enact your role as a human being. Your child sitting next to your boss sitting next to your golf partner sitting next to your next door neighbor sitting next to your parent sitting next to your brother and sister in Christ sitting next to the stranger on the highway who just cut you off. How would that be for you? Do you know yourself? And are you true to yourself while in the theater?

I suspect for most of us there might be some level of crisis that would arise when forced to play before our several audiences at one time. It's like going to someone's funeral and saying to yourself on the way out boy, I didn't know all those things about Joe. Strange how you don't realize all the theaters a person is playing to. Would there be any surprises for anyone in your life when they came to your funeral and listened to your eulogy?

"Beware," Jesus says, "beware of your theater. Beware of the audience you're playing to."

Truth is it may not only be overwhelming to consider bringing all of our audiences together and playing a consistent role in front of them. It may be, according to Jesus, the very last thing we should be thinking about. Because the truth is each of our audiences demands something different from us. Underscore the word "demand". For any actor the audience becomes the master. It's the

audience that judges the performance and the scales of judgments are different in each theater. The expectations of behavior are different. Truth is we rise and fall according to the demands of the audience.

So it should be no surprise that when Jesus starts his teaching on theater in Matthew 6 he quickly steers us to think not of many audiences and many theaters but of only one audience and only one person in the theater.

“When you pray ... go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who sees in secret.”

“When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret.”

“When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret.”

Do you see what Jesus is doing? He’s emptying out the theater. He is asking your boss to leave, he is asking your family to leave, he is asking your friends to leave, he is asking your neighbors to leave and he is asking the strangers to leave. He is clearing out the theater and asking only one person to remain inside the theater of your life and mine. “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.” Jesus is trying to simplify our lives. He is trying to shrink our audience down to one.

Who are you playing to? It may be the plainest, simplest and yet most profound question of your life. Who are you playing to?

We’ve already talked about some of the audiences. Employer, family, friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, strangers. But the list could go on and on. Maybe you’re playing to a person in your past. Maybe you are playing to a person of influence. Maybe you are playing to a dysfunctional family system. Maybe you are playing to your financial advisor. Maybe you are playing to a teacher or a coach.

When I was in seminary we had two required semesters of preaching -- one of which was a practicum wherein you preached before an audience of your peers and two faculty members. And following your preaching you were then before your peers critiqued by both of the faculty members. Talk about an audience! So I wrote and I preached my very first sermon there at Princeton and the professor got up after I was done and before my peers and friends proceeded to say that that was one of the worst sermons he had ever heard preached from the Christian pulpit. He was a very affirming guy. I would be less than honest if I did not tell you that even today that is someone I still play to ... someone I still preach to.

What about you. Who are you playing to?

You see it is no coincidence that in Matthew 6 just after Jesus spends a long time talking about all these audiences we play to he turns to the subject of worry. "Do not worry about your life," he says. And I suppose the reason he says it is he knows that there is only one audience in this life that matters and it is the audience that's left after we have emptied out the theater. It's the audience of one. And it may be that so much of the worry of our lives has to do with all these theaters and audiences we are trying to play to. Keeping up with the Joneses, pleasing the boss, making sure our kids have everything (I mean everything), putting on appearances in front of neighbors and strangers. All these selves we try to be. Jesus says, "Do not worry ... strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness ... and all these things will be given to you." Play out your life before an audience of one. Be yourself.

Remember that haunting line at the end of *A Death of a Salesman*, the family of Willie Lowman is gathered at his grave. Willie has lived a salesman's life, going from account to account, deal to deal ... trying to make something of himself. He's disappointed all the important people in his life ... most of all himself. He meets a tragic death and his son Biff stands over the grave and says, "He never knew who he was."

So the young rabbi he makes his journey to the cross. And while the disciples watch and the Pharisees watch and the Sadducees watch and the chief priests watch and the crowds watch and the Romans watch, Jesus seems rather oblivious to it all because he's playing to a theater of one. In the Garden of Gethsemane he's talking just to one. And on the cross the conversation is just with one. It's the only audience he has. It's the only way he will end up doing the right thing.

Self-control is the fruit Paul saved as the last on his list. I don't suspect it was for any rhyme or reason. But upon further reflection, maybe he saved the best for last. For without the self – the knowledge of the self and the control of the self – how could we ever hope to love, to be joyful, to have peace, to be patient, kind, good, faithful and gentle? Without the self – to know who we are and whose we are – do we stand much chance to bear such fruit? To follow the one who was there at our beginning and will be there at our end. And in between gives his life for us. This is our audience, isn't it? The one who gives us our life and give us his life too. This is our audience.

And there he sits the only one in the theater and says, "Be yourself. Recite your line. Play your part."

O ME! O life!, wrote Walt Whitman, ... of the questions of these recurring;
 Of the endless trains of the faithless—of cities fill'd with the foolish;
 Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)
 Of eyes that vainly crave the light—of the objects mean—of the struggle ever renew'd;
 Of the poor results of all—of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me;
 Of the empty and useless years of the rest—with the rest me intertwined;
 The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

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Answer.

That you are here—that life exists, and identity;
 That the powerful play goes on, and you will contribute a verse.