

*Falsetto*

(Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21)

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Brian Russo

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. And for the next seven Sundays of this season you will hear Cindy and I work through the eight verses of Psalm 130 as we process toward Easter and the day of our Lord's resurrection. For this morning however, we will exegete only the first verse, known as the *De Profundis*.

Which means and reads: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord." Out of the *depths*...

We interrupt your regularly scheduled sermon to bring you this special report:

"Do you love to sing, but find yourself constantly having trouble singing high notes? The most common reason that people have trouble singing high notes is that they are singing in a falsetto voice. Falsetto means that you have reached a point in your vocal range where your vocal chords have trouble holding themselves together. They literally start to separate so that your tone loses its depth. Sometimes this falsetto voice can be useful, but it is definitely better to be able to sing in a higher note with greater depth, most of the time."

This has been Lisa Lopez reporting, Article Alley news.

What's interesting more than perhaps funny about this announcement is that if you substitute "sing" with "worship God"; "vocal" with "spiritual"; "tone" with "faith"; "singing high notes" with "being authentic"; and "singing in a falsetto voice" with "worshipping God in a hypocritical manner" this seemingly tangential quote becomes congruent with the point of today's sermon.

To wit:

Do you love to worship God, but find yourself constantly having trouble being authentic? The most common reason that people have trouble being authentic is that they are worshipping God in a hypocritical manner. Hypocrisy means that you have reached a point in your spiritual range where your spiritual chords have trouble holding themselves together. They literally start to separate so that your faith loses its depth. Sometimes this hypocritical voice can be useful, but it is definitely better to be able to worship God in authenticity with greater depth, most [all] of the time.

Now, is it ever useful to play the hypocrite when worshipping God? Well, if we put on a show, if we talk the talk and fake the walk, others in their ignorance will affirm our piety and marvel at our righteousness at no cost of discipleship. Even if on the inside we know it to be false, sometimes we delude our spirit to live under this pretense of faith because dedication to Christian authenticity is often too difficult to manage, especially against the lusts that tempt us. Sometimes then, more often than we would probably like to admit, we choose to act like the hypocrites of old, seeking fraudulent rewards instead of treasures that come from truthful hearts beating in sync with divine rhythm.

Remember our gospel text from Matthew this morning: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 'So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But 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; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matt. 6:1-4)"

Did the hypocrites (literal translation: actors who worked in plays) in Jesus' time actually blow trumpets in the streets every time they turned a good deed? It's unclear, even if somewhat humorous to envision. But what is clear is the message Jesus had in mind. Don't go around singing your own praises when you do something you think noteworthy. Rather, be humble. Be for the kingdom's glory, not your own. And if you make a scene out of your piety so that others will pat you on the back then that shall be your only reward; that is, mortal attention and hollow affirmation. God on the other hand will not care; God will not take notice; God will overlook you.

So according to the definitive source of modern knowledge... Wikipedia...

“Our vocal folds are made up of elastic and fatty tissue. The folds are covered on the surface by a laryngeal mucous membrane which is supported deeper down underneath by the innermost fibers of the thyroarytenoid muscle. **When using falsetto** the extreme membranous edges, i.e. **the edges furthest away** from the middle of the gap between the folds, **appear to be the only parts vibrating**. The mass corresponding to **the innermost part** of the thyroarytenoid muscle **remains still and motionless**.

Now, I don't think it's an embellishment to say that both our culture and our church-life have suffered from apathy. And though it's true that many of us are still nurturing and expanding the Kingdom here on Earth, it seems that just as many are unwilling to take the next step. We say, let someone else take that step. We say, we are content to come to church and leave unchanged. And we assure ourselves that at least to the outside world we appear to be vibrating well within these walls; and that appearance alone is well enough indeed. Pity that at our innermost, our faiths have become as still as they are motionless; and trust me when I confess that I am not so pious to exclude myself from this charge.

Matthew 6:16-21 says: “whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

You see, in Jesus' time, Jews were required to fast once a year, but those who thought themselves pious usually practiced twice a week, typically on Monday and Thursday as those were the major Jewish market days. People from all around, both rich and poor, would come to do their shopping and/or their selling. Naturally then, town centers and city squares were most crowded on these days, and this is when the hypocrite would seize his opportunity. Hypocrites, sometimes ordinary, sometimes Pharisee, would adorn themselves in tattered clothes, dirty their hair and even put on makeup so to give off the appearance of someone sickly. They did this to show their righteousness to the masses, so that everyone could amaze at their dedication to a weekly fast. They did this for themselves and for no other reason.

That is who Jesus has in mind when he commands that you clean yourself up, that you comb your hair and oil your face, so that no one will see that you are fasting. Don't yield to sanctimony, he says. Don't wear the pretense of a struggling faith so to steal your audience's astonishment, to rob them of their sympathy. If you do so, truly that will be your only reward, for as Isaiah 58 agrees, God will not affirm you. God will not take notice or give credit to your falsetto. Your righteousness should be between you and God alone and calling attention to yourself dissolves any merit you think you may have earned.

My friends, the question then before us this morning is: *why* will we fast this season: for mortal recognition or for holy faithfulness? Why will we pray, or come here to worship? To earn points, to get approval, to put a check in the box? Or will we come here because of something resonating at greater depth? From this moment we have 40 days until Good Friday. We have an entire season for which we can rediscover the depths of our faith, or find for the first time the true pitch of our virtue. Out of these depths, far from the shallows, we can strive for God's and only God's attention. But if we remain hovering near the superficial, such that we desire the pat on the back, the “boy, you're a really good Christian;” and if we sail any closer to the shores of apathy such that we sleepwalk through this enlightening journey, it will only make Christianity distasteful to others and pointless for ourselves.

You and I both need to reexamine what it means answer this calling. Even if your faith has been substituted for doubt, even if you've hit the rock on the bottom and you're faith has never recovered, then wrestle with the question, grapple with the doubt. Don't give up! Reveling in your questions and doubts are always better than reveling in nihilism and nothingness. Lord knows all of my doubts, all of my questions. Don't run from them but meet them where they are so that you and I both can dive deeper into the Word, deeper into philosophy and theology, seeking potential answers we may have overlooked. The journey is never over until we choose to give it up.

And for those of us who think we've got it, let us remember to check our hypocrisy and quiet the falsettos of our fake piety. For we all need to hit the bottom of what all of this is about, to relearn why all of this is important, so that together with Christ on Easter morning we can rise from the ashes of our former selves toward life in truer discipleship.

Only then shall our light break forth like the dawn, and our healing quick, and divine grace and glory our rear guard. Only then shall we call and the Lord will answer, our pitch harmonized so God will say: Here I am.

Amen.