

Acting or Being Real

6th Sunday after Trinity

Sermon based on Deuteronomy 7:6-12



For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.⁷ It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set His love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples,⁸ but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that He swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.⁹ Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments, to a thousand generations,¹⁰ and repays to their face those who hate Him, by destroying them. He will not be slack with one who hates Him. He will repay him to his face.¹¹ You shall therefore be careful to do the commandment and the

statutes and the rules that I command you today.¹² And because you listen to these rules and keep and do them, the Lord your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love that He swore to your fathers.

Shohreh Aghdashloo was 19 when she had to get married in 1972 in Tehran. At that time, that was the only path she could choose for herself. And yet at that time she desperately wished for another life. Because of this, she joined a theater group and tried to imagine another life through the mask of an acting role. Shohreh Aghdashloo could escape a little bit from the person she really was and disappear into the life of a completely different person. She played her roles so well that later she became a world-famous actress. In reality, Shohreh Aghdashloo is still the same woman who married at age 19.

Are we Christians similar to Shohreh Aghdashloo? Just as Shohreh Aghdashloo walks into a television studio or film studio, so we walk into the church. In this house, would we put on a mask once a week and act out a well-rehearsed play? Sometimes stand, at other times kneel, sometimes sing, at other times join the chorus of "Amens," and otherwise try to appear pious. When it's all done, then what? Then we are again like everyone else. We live in the same country, use the same language, have the same customs and practices as everyone else. We go into the same stores to shop, and if we lose our job or want to rent a house, we line up at Job Center just like all the others. We Christians are no longer wise; we cannot even always say that we are morally better than people who are not Christians.

If all of this is true, one should really ask, what differentiates what we do here on Sunday from everyday life? Why should I do anything at all if it doesn't make a difference? And what reason do I have

to go to my non-Christian neighbors and relatives and tell them what they stand to gain by going to church, being baptized and becoming Christians? Beyond that they, like Shohreh Aghdashloo, dream of a better world? Our sermon text wants to warn us today not to surrender our identity as Christians. Just as we are on Sunday in worship, so also, we should act at home, at work, and in all areas of our lives. Moses preaches in our sermon text for today, encouraging his people to dare to be different.

We Christians aren't moving to the land of Canaan, but we do live in a country whose outlook on life is fundamentally different than the Christian life. There are many people in our country who are completely convinced that God does not exist. This outlook on life works well for them so much so that we are also attracted to this way of life. This attraction occurs so subtly, that we Christians can forget who we are and begin to blend it. It can even happen that we suppress important beliefs or are too shy to talk about them. The fundamental contents of the creed are faithfully uttered on Sunday but a different creed dominates the heart. There, instead of faith in the one true God, a different faith emerges: that there is no truth, so that somehow, everyone is right and there are many gods that everyone can customize to suit themselves. The statement that all people are sinners and need salvation through Jesus Christ no longer stands, but rather the confession that everyone is basically good and can find the good in themselves. The statement of faith that we Christians should be an influence on the world and be the salt of the earth no longer stands, but rather the creed that everyone should enjoy life. The most important thing is that I feel good.

God must warn the people of Israel like he warns us today that there is a very powerful force in the world that can tear away our belief in God very quickly and unnoticed. This power is so strong because it permeates everything. It is like water in an aquarium. Every fish in this aquarium is touched by this water and cannot get away from it, even if it tried. And we shouldn't try. Jesus Himself prayed to the heavenly Father: "I do not ask that You take them out of the world..." Live in the world but don't be changed by the world. How does that work if you are stuck in the world like a fish in an aquarium? There are two mistakes that we Christians could make. First, we could barricade ourselves in a castle and desperately try to exclude the world. Walls are built up and you deliberately try to push the world out of the Christian castle. These Christians are like a wild bull and stand contrary to the world. These people try to resist everything in the world and to separate themselves as good and proper. Quite often, such people occupy themselves with trivial things. A real Christian, so they say, does not go to clubs, doesn't put on make-up, wears different clothing... often such people start talking as follows: "a real Christian must..." There are always such people throughout the history of the church and up to this day. The advantage is that they are noticeably different. However, the big disadvantage is that such people draw attention to themselves and not to God. Look at me, they say, I am different. Look at my faith. Such Christians fail to see that they themselves are from the world and are themselves like all other sinners.

There is another way Christians can act. Here the Christian is not like a wild bull that is against the world but more like a chameleon. You know how it is with a chameleon. When it sits on a green branch, it turns green. If it sits on a brown branch, it turns brown. When Christians are like a chameleon, they parrot everything that is happening in the world: if everyone scolds the government, then they scold along. If everyone wants to worship a dictator, they go along with it. There were times, and still are times, where the Christian stood behind and supported harmful government orders. Our text from God's Word for today wants to show us that we should not stand neutral in our world. The world is not just a place to live. This is the space where God tells us that Satan, as ruler for a time will work mischief. That means that we can and will be tempted by Satan to fit in to the world and abandon important

doctrines. When this happens, we shouldn't simply give in and live in the moment, but we should always fight against the temptations in our environment. The Israelites at the time were encouraged to withstand temptation by staying in the temple and hearing the Word of God, not becoming like those around them. These places were like an island and oasis where a person was safe from the influences of the world. Do we know of such islands and oases in our world? Do we recognize the Church as the place where God wants to put us under His protection? Do we still know that through baptism, we entered another world and are children of our Lord Jesus and not children of the world? Do we still know what it means to be a Christian? And when we speak with a non-Christian, can we explain to him what it means that I am a Christian and why it's good that he also become Christian?

In practical terms, how can I be and remain a Christian in this world? Putting up walls is not acceptable, and neither is trying to blend in like a chameleon. Is there a third way? As Moses spoke to the people of Israel, he showed them a third way. The reason that God's people are different isn't because God's children are morally better. It also isn't because they are smarter. It's not because they are stronger either. Moses even says, for instance, that they are small in number and least important. The special characteristic exists in a single word. You are special, says God, because I have loved you. God's love for His people is the only reason that the Israelites exist. God's love that He showed us in Christ is the only reason we exist. God's love reveals itself to me so that I can pray in any need: "Lord, help!" God's love embraces my entire life so that I may use the same language, live in the same country, etc. but I know that my home is elsewhere, and not of this world. Because God has touched me in this way with His love, I cannot help but continually radiate and talk about it. It is not acceptable for me to sit in my house and admire myself for how good I am and how good my life is. No, filled with God's love, I am constantly going to the people around me. I know that God loves me just as He loves everyone out there. He also wants them to hear the Gospel and to be able to come to Him. That's why He wants us to stay in the world. When the world no longer exists, it will no longer need the Church.

Our life as a Christian is like a tightrope walk. By speaking with people around me, I am immersed in their world and lives. It is a tightrope walk to be like those in the world yet still surrounded by God's love on the way to eternal salvation.

It is God alone who keeps us from falling into either self-glorification or self-denial. Amen.