St. Andrew's Sermons
The Rev. John Rohrs
October 31, 2021

Today is All Hallows' Eve [shout out to anyone in costume], and I have to tell you, it's a little bittersweet in our house, because our kids have made it clear that they have outgrown the family costume. We had a great run when they were younger. We did the Wizard of Oz, Star Wars, superheroes, Harry Potter. It was fun, but our kids have understandably reached the age when it's no longer cool to be seen with your parents.

But at least they're still into Halloween. They've all picked out costumes, and Andie and I have a killer costume with biblical overtones – we'll have to share it on the church Facebook later. But there's just something timeless about Halloween. When you're a kid it's all about the candy, I guess, but at any age, it's just fun to dress up; it's like taking a break from yourself and trying on a new identity for a few hours.

What's interesting, though, is that we actually wear masks all year round. I don't mean Covid masks; I mean figurative, symbolic masks. Consciously or not, we spend a lot of time hiding our true selves, and that's what I want to talk about today.

Today's gospel is a familiar one – Jesus is talking about the great commandment. Love God with all your heart and soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. Taken together, these form the basis of the Christian life. So we talk about all the time about loving God and loving our neighbors. But we don't talk quite as often about loving ourselves, and in some ways that is the hardest part.

The truth is a lot of people struggle to love themselves. There's an epidemic of shame and insecurity and self-doubt. We measure ourselves against impossible ideals of success and beauty and happiness, and we always come up short. We compare ourselves to societal norms and expectations, and feel that we don't fit in. We're afraid to admit that we can't do it all, that our jobs or grades or marriages aren't perfect, that we struggle with anxiety or depression or addiction. To cope with all this pressure, we put on masks – at work, at home, on social media. We

pretend that everything's fine, because we don't want others to see beneath the surface.

To love ourselves truly, we need to take off those masks. And church is a good place to start. This is a place to be vulnerable, to be real, to respond honestly when someone asks how you're doing; those are holy conversations. This is a place to admit that we're not perfect, and instead to celebrate that we are wonderfully and beautifully made. God created us in God's own image, and God loves us as we are, warts and all. That doesn't mean there's not room for change, of course – especially if we're stuck in negative patterns. But we come here to remember that our foundation, our starting place, is in the heart of our Creator.

We are God's beloved children. That's who we are without the mask. And claiming that identity actually keeps us from getting stuck in self-centeredness. Loving ourselves does not mean focusing on ourselves. It's just the opposite. If we love ourselves as God loves us, it opens us more fully to relationship with each other. It helps us see every person as God's beloved child. It inspires us to embrace and care for one another. It's a cyclical thing, the great commandment. Loving ourselves leads to love of neighbor and love of God.

So have fun tonight. Trick or treat, eat some candy; wear a costume if you're so inclined. But tomorrow, make sure you're not putting that other mask back on. God wants to see the real you, and so do we, for we are God's beloved children, just as we are. Amen.