

Text: 1 Corinthians 9.19-23

Drag Sermon

During the 13th century, there was a popular story going around Europe about a woman named Joan. Joan was an intelligent and educated woman, living in a time and a place when women were, for the most part, not appreciated for their intelligence. Joan disguised herself as a man and went by the name John. This allowed her to travel freely with her companion, and to get the education, respect, and freedom that society would not have allowed her otherwise. She accompanied her lover to Rome, where she became so knowledgeable and respected, she moved up in the ranks of the church to become a cardinal, and ultimately, Pope John Anglicus. The story goes on to say that Joan was discovered when she gave birth during a procession. She was then brutally put to death, and buried on that spot where she gave birth, on the road between the Colosseum and St Clement's church. In the time after her, the reigning pope would turn away from that street during processions.

The story of Pope Joan is believed to be a fiction, yet it is a fiction that has power throughout its history, influencing the actions of popes and cardinals throughout the Middle Ages, and used as anti-catholic propaganda by reformers. It is a story that tells us something about the lengths we often have to go to in order to be ourselves. We are, like Joan, always in drag. The self I present at church, the self I present at Union, and the self I present elsewhere, are often different selves.

I am not bound to anyone. I am free to present myself and represent myself however I see fit. I am free to be myself, yet being my unfiltered, raw, whole, authentic and flawed self can harm and offend, and earn me judgment and scorn. Depending on the situation I am in, there are parts of myself that need to stay in the closet, and other parts that need to come out. So I have become all things to all people.

While I am always myself, I am always presenting myself through a filter. I am always choosing my words. There is a recognition of not just me and my needs, but the needs of those around me and my relationship with them. And so, without giving it much thought, without makeup or wig or spectacle or ceremony, I participate in the ritual of drag that we all participate in.

In the same way, that which we call the Divine, God, Spirit, Goddess, Christ, Creator, Brahman, that which is beyond the confines of names and theologies, that which reveals the sacred in our everyday lives, that is also in drag. The God we encounter in this sacred space may not be the God we encounter in other places of worship. Even if we hold to the notion that God is One, my *encounter* with the God I have known through Christ, is not the same as your encounter with God. While there are common threads, the garment is different. Our encounters with God, as rich and complex as they may be, are shaped by our cultural and religious context, and limited by our finite nature.

Drag is both performative and interpretative. It is a caricature of ourselves, providing the space for a level of freedom of expression that is otherwise denied, acting as both mask and mouthpiece. Drag both hides the performer and demands the attention of everyone in the room. Drag can be subversive and dangerous. Tonight is our annual Mardi Gras Drag Show. Every year we have to explain to the audience how important it is to get people's permission before taking their picture. Some of our performers may come from communities and families that aren't so understanding. I long for the day when that warning is no longer necessary.

We can find salvation through the ritual of drag. Drag shows us how we become all things to all people, and how, through doing so, we save ourselves by freeing ourselves to find our most authentic voice. We might even save others from their preconceived notions about who we are. Drag challenges us to encounter God in Drag, to face the preconceived notions we have of the Divine and turn them on their heads, to see God **through** the eyes of another, to see God **in** the eyes of another, to remember that “whatsoever you do to the least of these, that you do unto Me.”

Drag frees us, reminding us that all things can become sacred, holy, beautiful. When we see the beauty in others, when we see the beauty in ourselves, our whole selves, in and out of drag, we see the beauty of the life we share together. We see the potential for community. We see the manifestations of love. We see that women can become popes, that men can become queens, that we can fight against the confines of society's gender roles and expectations.

We cannot be confined by artificial binaries. We need the freedom to explore what it means to be ourselves—our whole selves, whether we are man, woman, cis, trans, genderqueer. We need safe spaces, safe communities, and when we cannot find them, we need to make them. When we encounter resistance from those who say such things are “abominations,” we need to remind them that there is no longer male and female. We are all created in God's image. We are all Her children.

What we do here now is sacred.

What we do here tonight is sacred.

May we always remember the sacredness of this work, in and out of drag.