

I love eating with other people - in my job, I get to go out with lots of different people and I just love it. I was out this week with a friend of mine and we went to Red Robin. We both got the chophouse burger, which has onion straws on it. And as we were eating and talking, both of us had the same problem with the onion straws. We'd take a bite of burger, and then almost like really stringy cheese, a stray onion would stretch out from our mouths back to our burger and we'd keep pulling to get to the end of the onion but it was one of those 10-mile long onions. So he'd take a bite and have the long piece of onion and eventually get it in his mouth, then apologize. Then I'd take a bite - same thing.

We both had a good laugh about it, but that's the funny thing about eating with other people: it can get pretty awkward. In fact, eating with other people can get pretty stressful. Everyone knows not to go out for Italian on a first date - why? Because it's messy! And you want to make a great first impression!

But it's not just dates where we think about what we'll eat. Why? Well, consider how socially vulnerable we all are during a meal. Who hasn't spilled something on themselves, dribbled food? If you've never laughed so hard your drink came out your nose, you haven't really laughed. For that matter, when you stop to think about it (and we won't for very long, don't worry), the entire process of digestion is a very unglamorous activity. The only time we're more vulnerable than when we're eating is maybe when we're sleeping. At mealtimes, more than most other social spaces, we're not totally put together. Our carefully crafted persona exposed.

So it makes sense that for so long, the meal has been the core of our social realities. That for most of our history, the people we were closest to could be found around our tables. We chose to share tables with the people who knew us best. In fact, mealtimes in the ancient world were mostly public events. In the ancient world, you could usually *see* who everyone was eating with. Imagine, if you will, a high school lunch room.

You ate with your friends, with the people closest to you. The meal became a safe, almost sacred space where you could be yourself. Where the people around the table *knew* you.

That's not the case so much anymore. We're rarely - if ever - truly known, and certainly not necessarily around a table.

I was dating a girl a few years ago, and we'd gotten to that point in our relationship when it was time for me to meet her friends. So naturally, I was a little bit nervous - you know, what if they don't like me and all that. So we met them for dinner. Here I was, at a table with all these strangers I wanted to impress.

I remember one of the guys was a former football player for Mizzou. I'd never met a Div I athlete before, so I was fascinated to learn what it was like to play at that level and go to school at the same time. One of the women did Teach for America, so she was teaching in an inner city school. Since I'm a teacher of sorts, I was enthralled by the challenges she faced and how she was dealing with them. And her husband customized private jets for celebrities. He'd worked on Jim Carrey's plane, done one for Tom Cruise.

I felt like I was at a table of celebrities. All I did was ask questions the whole time.

So a couple of days later, my girlfriend called me up and told me I was a big hit with her friends - which was a total relief. But then she said, "What really impressed them was that you asked them questions, and it seemed like you really cared what the answers were."

Hold on. What?

I asked them questions. And it seemed like I cared what the answers were?

And *that's* impressive?

Here I was at a table full of totally fascinating people, and all it took to blow their minds was caring about their totally interesting lives?

What that told me was how little they encountered anyone who'd taken a genuine interest in them. How little they got to share their day-to-day lives, their interests, their hopes for the future.

See, somewhere along the way, we've taken a wrong turn. Somehow, we became a culture, a society, a people who never shares our true Selves with others. We've become a people who exist mainly as functions, skilled at small talk that skims across the surface of our lives, never scratching deeper than that. We've constructed these public facades and wear them like masks, never letting people see the real us underneath. [Maybe do the stick guy with the veneer here, but no Jacob/Esau yet. Then we can bring it back once we do the story]

There's a tension we naturally feel here - I don't think there's anything inherently wrong with a persona or a facade. In fact, we all use them to some degree or another. After all, we don't share with the clerk who checks us out at the grocery store to the same depth we share with a spouse, significant other or best friend.

But there's a real danger in constructing personae. Facades can take us over.

One of the greatest illustrations of this truth comes from Genesis 27. Here we encounter Isaac, the son of Abraham. He's reaching the end of his life, and so he's ready to write his will, so to speak. In the time of the Patriarchs, this was done by speaking a Blessing over the son you wanted to succeed you. To speak a Blessing was the ancient, illiterate equivalent of signing a will - just as binding and irrevocable. Isaac and his wife Rebekah have twin boys, Esau and Jacob [pic]. They couldn't have been more different. Esau was the big, burley, hairy, manly warrior type. Jacob, on the other hand, was a baby-faced nerd. To be kind, we could say that Isaac's family was dysfunctional. The parents played obvious favorites - Isaac loved Esau while Jacob was a momma's boy.

At this point in our story, Isaac is old. He's going blind and he wants to get this matter of inheritance sorted out before he dies. So he calls in Esau and tells him to get a meal ready - go kill me an animal and grill it up like I like it. Esau goes off, but Rebekah overhears, so she schemes to have her favorite Jacob get the Blessing:

Let's pick up the story in verse 5:

But Rebekah overheard what Isaac had said to his son Esau. So when Esau left to hunt for the wild game, she said to her son Jacob, "Listen. I overheard your father say to Esau, 'Bring me some wild

game and prepare me a delicious meal. Then I will bless you in the LORD's presence before I die.' Now, my son, listen to me. Do exactly as I tell you. Go out to the flocks, and bring me two fine young goats. I'll use them to prepare your father's favorite dish. Then take the food to your father so he can eat it and bless you before he dies."

Not a bad plan right? But Jacob knows Isaac isn't dumb.

"But look," Jacob replied to Rebekah, "my brother, Esau, is a hairy man, and my skin is smooth. What if my father touches me? He'll see that I'm trying to trick him, and then he'll curse me instead of blessing me."

But his mother replied, "Then let the curse fall on me, my son! Just do what I tell you. Go out and get the goats for me!"

So Jacob went out and got the young goats for his mother. Rebekah took them and prepared a delicious meal, just the way Isaac liked it. Then she took Esau's favorite clothes, which were there in the house, and gave them to her younger son, Jacob. She covered his arms and the smooth part of his neck with the skin of the young goats. Then she gave Jacob the delicious meal, including freshly baked bread. " -- Genesis 27:5-17 (NLT)

You can imagine the tension Jacob feels, right, as he walks into Isaac's room with the meal? Here he is, about to enter into this sacred moment - an Ancient Mealtime - and he's actually trying to be someone he's not. He's wearing a very literal and obvious facade. Imagine this scene as a film, the tension in the room, as Jacob walks in with the food, blind Isaac sitting up as he hears the footsteps, smells the aroma of his favorite meal:

Jacob took the food to his father. "My father?" he said.

"Yes, my son," Isaac answered. "Who are you-- Esau or Jacob?"

Jacob replied, "It's Esau, your firstborn son. I've done as you told me. Here is the wild game. Now sit up and eat it so you can give me your blessing."

Deep breaths. Just eat the food, Dad. Eat it fast and bless me.

Isaac asked, "How did you find it so quickly, my son?" "The LORD your God put it in my path!" Jacob replied.

Deep breaths. Quit asking questions. Shut up and eat your food.

Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Come closer so I can touch you and make sure that you really are Esau." So Jacob went closer to his father, and Isaac touched him. "The voice is Jacob's, but the hands are Esau's," Isaac said. But he did not recognize Jacob, because Jacob's hands felt hairy just like Esau's. So Isaac prepared to bless Jacob.

Whew. It's a little hard to believe he fell for it, but it looks like we're in the clear.

"But are you really my son Esau?" he asked."

Yes, I am," Jacob replied. Then Isaac said, "Now, my son, bring me the wild game. Let me eat it, and then I will give you my blessing." So Jacob took the food to his father, and Isaac ate it. He also drank the wine that Jacob served him.

Okay. Food's eaten. He must've bought it. Now the blessing?

Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Please come a little closer and kiss me, my son." So Jacob went over and kissed him. And when Isaac caught the smell of his clothes, he was finally convinced, and he blessed his son. He said, "Ah! The smell of my son is like the smell of the outdoors, which the LORD has blessed!

Aaaaaand the clothes sealed the deal. Isaac finally falls for it and he blesses Jacob:

"From the dew of heaven and the richness of the earth, may God always give you abundant harvests of grain and bountiful new wine. May many nations become your servants, and may they bow down to you. May you be the master over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. All who curse you will be cursed, and all who bless you will be blessed." -- Genesis 27:18-30 (NLT)

Of course no sooner has he spoken this irrevocable blessing than Esau walks in with a dead animal strapped to his back. When he and Isaac figure out what happens, Isaac is devastated and Esau furious. It's so bad, in fact, that Jacob has to run away so Esau doesn't kill him.

And for the next 20 years, Jacob lives in hiding from his brother. He misses the deaths of both his mother and father. He lives far from everything that was supposed to be his. In fact, Jacob's facade, his trickery, cost him the best years of his life. Instead of enjoying what should have been his, he lived as a stranger, an immigrant, relying on other families to host him.

I want to suggest to you this morning that we are all much more like Jacob than we're comfortable admitting. It's easy to see Jacob's facade, right? He was really Jacob, but pretended to be Esau [now put their faces on the stick-man graphic]. Jacob's facade was a total lie. He was pretending to be a totally different person.

But when we construct any sort of public persona, when we hide who we really are, we become Jacob. Most of us don't go so far as to create a totally fake Self, we don't become a wholly different person. But we hide ourselves. We don't fully display who we really are. [maybe here blow up the persona to have the scale in it. make it look number-liney]

And the truth is, we can get into a habit of facade building. I'm not sure exactly when it starts (though if Toddlers & Tiaras is any indication, it's basically from birth), but we learn early on that our value comes from external, quantifiable realities - athletic ability, academic achievement, how closely our bodies match up with airbrushed, photoshopped models, the price tag on our clothes, the balance of our bank accounts.

So we create a Public Self for the world to see. Some of our Public Selves pretty closely resemble us. But we get trapped into creating a Public Self that's less and less representative of who we really are. And at some point, we have to ask if the Self I'm portraying to the world is really Me at

all, or if it's become a false Persona, a Mask. If maybe we've become as false as Jacob was when he pretended to be Esau.

Sadly, Church is one of the places we fake it the most. If you want to see a bunch of Esaus, Sunday mornings are a good time to catch us all with our masks on. Once upon a time, putting on your Sunday Best meant wearing your best outfit out of respect for God. But somewhere along the way, we got this idea that Sunday Best meant we had to act the part even if it wasn't real.

So we put on our best (fake) smiles even if we were screaming at each other in the car on the way here.

Or if we had a really lonely weekend.

Or if our kids were just more than we could handle.

Or if we just sort of feel like we're at our wits' end.

Whatever Jacob's really going through Mon-Sat, he puts on an Esau Sunday Best smile and shows up and looks around at all the other smiling facades and thinks, I can't believe they're all so happy. I can't believe I'm the only one who doesn't have it all together.

Which is silly. None of us has it together. We've all had THAT Sunday. We all have THAT Sunday a lot. We wouldn't be here if we didn't.

That's the danger of the Facade. When we make a living out of being a fake person, we end up trapped by that facade. It gets harder and harder to take the mask off. [you know, a creepy president mask would be awesome... just saying...]

All we Jacobs end up living in the shadow of our Esau facades. And it gets lonely under there. The energy it takes to maintain a facade is exhausting. No one enjoys it. No one actually likes the routines we develop for ourselves. No one *likes* to feel like we're constantly maintaining an image, a projection, an illusion, while our real self stays hidden. We end up like my ex's friends... somewhere along the way we stopped having real relationships with people and we're desperate for even the barest hint of a real, meaningful interaction that all it takes is a stranger who *seems* like they *sort of* have some kind of interest in our lives.

Which is sad, because deep down, we all *need* to be known. Deep down, none of us wants to live in the shadow of our carefully crafted images. We want to come into the light and feel the freedom to be ourselves, to feel loved and accepted for who we *actually* are.

Which is why the Gospel is such good news for all us Jacobs. Because guess who's at Jesus' table? Meals in Jesus' day were just like the high school cafeteria. Everyone ate with the people they were closest to. It's not too overly-simplistic to say that the cliques back then all hung together, too. The rich people would all eat together, and the religious crowd over there, and often the "sinners" would all end up eating together.

In the Gospels, Jesus is constantly eating - it's like watching a Brad Pitt movie. In fact, Jesus eats with people so often that his critics accuse him of being a glutton and drunkard. But that was

Jesus' ministry - he was so full of life he just connected with people everywhere. He laughed. He seemed like he was genuinely enjoying himself. (I know, that's not the picture of Jesus we have. We think he was a total drag - always serious and somber, maybe a little weepy. But that kind of guy doesn't get a reputation for being a partier.)

But who did Jesus party with? Who did Jesus share his table with? Tax collectors, prostitutes, other people considered to be "unsavory". And with Pharisees and other religious leaders. Jesus connected with everyone. He didn't judge. He didn't condemn. He just invited. He said, Don't you want the full, abundant life you see me living? Then come follow me.

Whoever you are. Whatever kind of life you lead. You don't have to shape up first. You don't have to get your stuff together first. You don't have to "fix" yourself first.

You don't have to put on your Sunday Best. Just come and follow me.

See, Jesus actually believed his good news was... Good. Really Good. Like fun and exciting and amazing. So he just kept inviting people to hang out with him.

He'd invite himself over to other peoples' parties. He'd tell other people to *throw* parties so he could show up. That's what happened when he met Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a tax collector, which was like an IRS agent who came, did your taxes and then took however much money he wanted off the top - essentially a legal crook. He's a really short guy, so when he hears Jesus is coming to town, he climbs a tree so he can see. So Jesus meets Zacchaeus and says,

Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today. -- Luke 19:5 (NLT)

If someone wasn't throwing a party, Jesus got one started. Because his good news was *that* Good. Is that your picture of Church? Of the Gospel?

Be honest with yourself. Doesn't that sound like the kind of God you want to follow? Doesn't that sound like the kind of guy you'd want to hang out with?

The person who's the life of the party because he brings Life to the party?

Do you understand that all we Jacobs who hide behind our Esau masks don't actually *need* them here? That when we gather with other believers, that's one of the places we can take our masks *off* and be who we really are?

Because we all worship the God who throws parties and invites everyone, just like we are. He's the God who shares a table with the ultra-religious *and* the super-pagan. Because the truth is we're *all* messed up. We *all* need to be rescued.

If we're all drowning, does it really matter that I'm in deeper water than you are? Of course not! We *all* need to be rescued!

We all are welcomed into the Light of Jesus' Good News. *That's* why we can be our true Selves. That's why this space and all those small group spaces are so life-giving.

Because here at least I can really be Me. And I find not condemnation. Not judgment. But welcome.

I know what some of you are thinking...

You were just about ready to sign up for a group and now you're freaked out. You're imagining yourself signing up for a group and thinking, Do I really have to show up that first week with all the skeletons I keep in my closet ready for show-and-tell? [\[find a good pic or graphic for this\]](#)

Nope. That's not what this is about. Authenticity doesn't mean you just word-vomit all your darkest secrets to a room of new friends. Frankly, that's irresponsible. Authenticity isn't an all-or-nothing thing. And trust isn't something you just conjure out of thin air. These small groups are about beginning to journey together. They're about creating a space that's safe, about living the kind of life Jesus went around bringing to the people he met.

These 6-week small groups? They're not magical. After a couple of hours together, you're not suddenly going to be best friends with all ten of the other people you've just met. That's silly.

But that's the struggle with churches that try to start small groups. We think we have to all be best friends on the first week. That's like showing up for a first date and trying to decide if you're going to marry this person or not.

Calm. Down.

And let me be real with you: you are NOT going to be BFFs with anyone in your small group. At least not right away, probably not ever.

That's not the point of small groups. We're just living life together. We're brothers and sisters, all on the same journey, sharing our experiences, hanging out. We're recovering that sacred space we once found around the dinner table. We're rediscovering the magic of the front porch.

We're friends. We're spiritual neighbors and family. And we're learning to take real joy in our community.

The truth is, you're all pretty cool people. And all we're asking you to do is hang out. Not find a new best friend. Not share your deepest darkest secrets. Just... hang out. Have some real, authentic conversations. Because that's what it takes to really connect, to really form those meaningful, life-giving connections.

It's not about sharing your deepest darkest secrets. But it is about getting rid of your facade. So when you're spending time with your brothers and sisters here, ask yourself this question:

Am I trying to be myself, or am I trying to be someone else?

That's it. Am I trying to be myself, or am I trying to be someone else? This can be as easy as you have a question: do you ask it, or do you keep your mouth shut because you think it's a dumb question and you want to appear smarter than you think you are?

Ask the question.

Or, someone comments and you want to respond with something that will make you sound holy and spiritual. You wouldn't normally say it, but you want to impress your group.

Keep your mouth shut.

Which direction are you moving? Are you building your facade, your mask, or are you sharing more of your true Self? [[bring the scale graphic back](#)] Are you trying to be yourself, or are you trying to be someone else?

True community only grows where there's authenticity. So choose to be real. Choose to be yourself. That's the only way you'll grow. That's the only way you can truly connect with your brothers and sisters. And that's truly the only way you'll ever connect with God.

Don't be like Jacob. Don't let trying to be someone else ruin your life, destroy your family and friends. Choose to believe God's promise of freedom and welcome.

Communion Set Up

Today, you're invited to share Jesus' table. This is the place he invited anyone. It doesn't matter if you're super-religious or if you were half afraid the Church was going to catch fire when you walked in the doors.

Jesus wants to share his Good News with you: That you were created by a God who knows you completely and who loves you totally. That the Sin and Death that characterize this world don't have to be what define you. That at Jesus' table you find welcome and rescue.

Jesus offers us bread as his body, broken for our sin.

Jesus offers us wine (we use juice) as his blood, poured out for our rescue, to unite us with God.

So as you come to his table today, eat this meal as a promise to be yourself. To be honest and real with God and with your brothers and sisters.

God didn't die for a facade. He wasn't raised for a lie.

Let's pray together.