



# New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

## REAL DEAL

*Jeff Peabody  
New Day Church  
Federal Way, WA  
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It's good to be back with you this morning. We were over in Poulsbo last weekend, and didn't realize until we got there that it was the weekend of their 42<sup>nd</sup> annual Viking Fest. I'm still trying to figure out exactly what made it a Viking festival when they had Irish River dancers and a Teriyaki chicken stand and Hawaiian shaved ice.

But there was this group of people there dressed up as Vikings or some sort of pirates, and it quickly became clear that for them, it wasn't just a costume they were wearing for the weekend – it was a lifestyle they had adopted. They were camping out in Viking tents, wearing medieval garb, speaking in pseudo accents and sporting the grizzliest beards you've ever seen. They weren't there to act out Viking battles or demonstrate Viking activities – they were kind of just hanging out in a different century.

You got the feeling that they were choosing an alternate reality to modern life. For whatever reason, they preferred a pretend world to the real one.

Now I'm not here to pick on anyone for playing dress up or being into their Scandinavian heritage. You can do what you want with your free time. But as I thought about them, I realized I have more in common with them than I like to admit. Because I like to disconnect from reality too. It's hard to face all the pain or boredom or stress of everyday life and it's often much more appealing to find some distraction or way to escape. And if there's one thing our culture does really well, it is to provide all kinds of ways to avoid real life.

For many people, church is one more of those places where you just ignore reality. It can feel like everyone else has their act together, so you pretend your life is just fine when it isn't. It can be a place where you stay anonymous so nobody ever has to even know your history or struggles. It can be a place where people with problems are viewed as less spiritual so the masks just stay on.

But our God is the God of reality, and Jesus said we're supposed to worship him in Spirit and in truth. That means pretending doesn't really have a place when it comes to church life. So when we started New Day, we wanted to incorporate honesty and transparency and authenticity into our values.

We're now in week five of our study of our core values. Just to recap what we've already covered, here they are:

1. Worship is central.
2. Truth must be well-told.
3. The church is a mission outpost.
4. Every Christian is a minister.

Today, we're looking at value #5, which is: **Authenticity rules the day**. I think I've shared with you before about one time when I was leading worship at a church many years ago, I was kind of in a funk that morning and not in a great frame of mind for worship – let alone leading. And as we walked into the service, the pastor said to me, “Just remember -- a smile covers over a multitude of sins.”

I did not know how to take that. That's the kind of “fake it til you make it” philosophy many people have about church. Look the part and don't bring anyone else down with your negativity. And sometimes acting happy can help you start to feel happier. But church should be the one place where you can be the most honest and open about where you're at without fear of being judged. Sinners felt safe and loved coming to Jesus and it shouldn't be any different with his followers. We shouldn't be afraid of being real.

We also want church to be a place where people feel like they're dealing with straight shooters who aren't trying to sell them a line. You always hear people say the reason they don't go to church is because it's full of hypocrites, people who talk one way and act another. While that may be a cop out on the part of the people not going to church, it's still a good reminder that people can smell fake a mile away, and once they recognize that, they won't feel safe being themselves in that setting.

But I think this value is bigger than what happens when we're together as a group. After several years of walking side by side with people in this congregation as they navigate life, I've come to believe that authenticity is one of the most essential concepts for us to grasp individually. Because I have seen so many lives damaged when someone has been unable to be real and deal with reality.

Authenticity is a big word and we could go a lot of different ways with it. Just like with so many of the other values we've looked at, we need to define the terms a bit to make sure we're all talking about the same thing. For authenticity, I want to shape it a bit more than how we might normally use the word.

I read a story this week about a young man named William Henry Ireland who lived in England back in the late 1700s. His father was a die-hard fan of all things Shakespeare, but he didn't think much of his son. And William really wanted his dad's approval. So one day, when he was about 18, he came home with a present for his dad. It was an old-looking receipt for a loan that appeared to have been signed by Shakespeare himself. Young William claimed to have gotten it from a client at work who wanted to remain anonymous.

His father was ecstatic. Before long, William came home with another document bearing the Bard's signature. Then another. Then a letter to his wife, Anne Hathaway. Then a letter from the Queen to Shakespeare. Then, wonder of wonders, a play that Shakespeare had never published – Vortigern and Rowena.

Dear old dad was buying all of this. And the public was eating it up. But scholars were not. It didn't take much investigation to show that none of the documents were real. People and dates were wrong. Some of the language in it didn't exist in Shakespeare's day. The Queen's handwriting didn't match other known pieces with her writing. Not to mention the fact that the quality of the play was definitely not Shakespearean.

The verdict was clear: They were all forgeries. William Henry finally confessed. But his father refused to believe his son was smart enough to pull something like that off, so he went to his grave insisting that the documents were real.

I share that story because it gets to the heart of authenticity in its original sense. Authenticity comes from the same word as author, and to authenticate something that has been written is to answer the question: Is this the work of the author we're talking about?

I like that. It gives me a slightly different way to think about my own authenticity. Because being authentic is more than just being honest about my problems and accepting my flaws, although that's important. Being authentic is getting to my true self. If God is the author of my life, what is his work and what isn't? What parts of my life are imitations and forgeries that I've added on? That's what I want to strip away.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer would say that the reason Christ came wasn't to make us more religious, but to make us more human. By dying for our sins, he was removing the portion that wasn't the author's intent. He restored a way for us to be truly authentic human beings again, bearers of the image of God.

So what does it look like for us to be authentic? And what will a church family look like if we think of ourselves as authored by God?

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he shares a few thoughts with that community that I believe give us an outstanding framework for talking about this value.

### **2 Corinthians 3:17-4:3**

*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

*Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do*

*we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.*

In just a few short verses, Paul gives us both a picture of authenticity and the patterns and choices that lead away from it. I want to start by looking at those destructive choices and then work our way back out to where we want to find ourselves. Look again at the middle of this passage:.

*Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God.*

In one sentence he lays out four words that are enemies of authenticity: Secrecy, Shame, Deception and Distortion. Let's look at them one by one, starting with secrecy.

### **Secrecy**

John Corcoran has written a book called "The Teacher Who Couldn't Read." When he was 8 years old, he prayed that God would make him be able to read in class when it was his turn. When the miracle didn't happen, he began acting out to get out of reading. He kept getting passed along without anyone questioning things in grade school. They just thought he had an emotional problem or behavioral problem instead of a reading problem.

In middle school and high school, he says he went underground. Instead of relying on behavior, he turned to cheating, and developed all kinds of sophisticated ways to cover up and hide his inability to read. He cheated his way through every class.

He graduated from high school and went on to college and did the same thing only on a more elaborate level. It intensified. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in education, of all things. And then he got a job teaching social studies for 17 years, relying on teacher's assistants and students to avoid ever having to read or write.

Finally, at the age of 48, he couldn't stand it anymore. He went to a library and enrolled in a literacy program, and within just a short time, he was able to read at a sixth grade level.

Here he was, hanging on to a secret for decades that he didn't need to. Holding on to the secret was only hurting him and generating a huge amount of work to get around it and cover it up.

That's always been true. Secrets take an incredible volume of energy to protect. From the time Adam and Eve realized they were naked and set about sewing leaves together, people have always gone to elaborate amounts of work to maintain secrets. It takes a lot of energy and effort to hide. We think we're protecting ourselves when we're really just locking ourselves in.

What secrets are standing in your way of authenticity? Is it your life on the internet? Is there a family secret you never talk about? What does everyone in your household know is a taboo subject?

I'm going to give you a moment right now to just talk to God about it and ask him to help you bring it into the light.

## **Shame**

The second thing Paul mentions in his list is shameful ways – ways that are full of shame. What produces a sense of shame in me? It could be my patterns of thinking, habits I know are wrong but keep doing, even a lifetime of messages from parents or a spouse can generate shame.

Shame that is associated with certain behavior can be a good thing. Like the pain we feel if we touch a hot stove, shame can be a warning signal to move away from something harmful. But shame quickly outgrows its usefulness, and instead of encouraging us to change, it can make us feel like we can't change.

Where guilt says, "I did something wrong," shame twists that around and says, "I am something wrong. I'm worthless. I'm worse than you and I don't want you to see me." Because we feel that way about ourselves, it leads to more of the hiding and secrecy we were talking about.

How do I know if what I'm feeling is shame? It can result in a whole cluster of emotions that will manifest themselves in various ways. Here are a few signs that are good indicators that we're dealing with shame:

- *I'm involved in something I don't want anyone to know about*
- *I have trouble letting other people get close to me*
- *I'm afraid of being rejected if I ask for help*
- *I feel shut down emotionally*
- *I see my mistakes as beyond fixing*
- *I am too overwhelmed to make choices*
- *I don't see myself as having any value*
- *I don't know where my anger or rage is coming from*
- *I'm making self destructive choices (addictions, etc.)*

Those are all unhealthy characteristics of shame, and they can make us feel stuck. But the fact that Paul says to "renounce" shameful ways gives me encouragement. To renounce something is to turn your back on something that was once an important part of your life, to disown it. And if knowing Christ means we can do renounce something as powerful as shame, then there is great hope. It won't be instant, but it can happen.

We'll talk about that hope in just a minute, but there are two more things Paul says he was avoiding.

*we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God.*

## **Deception**

Secrecy hides things, but deception invents things. It invents an alternative to reality, and does its best to convince everyone that the lie is true. The goal of deception is to lead people in the opposite direction of authenticity, because it wants them to disengage from what is real.

We all have had the experience of either lying or being lied to, so we understand the hurt caused by deception. But sometimes we practice it in more subtle ways without realizing that's what it is. This is especially true in church. Since we know the Christian thing to do is be loving and kind, sometimes we're less than truthful to someone's face. Maybe they've hurt us or done something questionable. Instead of confronting them, we might be extra nice to them in person. Then at some point when they're not around, our resentment comes out sideways as we lash out at them through back channels. That's one form of deception that's especially hurtful.

The book of James says another form of deception is when we read something in Scripture and then don't apply it. We convince ourselves that just reading it is somehow all that matters, when the reality is that there's an action we need to take. But we fool ourselves into believing something different.

Or maybe the form of deception we use is to minimize our problems when we're around other people to give the illusion that we're doing better than we are. This is the idea behind "a smile covers over a multitude of sins."

In each of these kinds of situations, what we're doing is removing ourselves one step further from reality, putting a layer of lies between us and it. Maybe we do it for our own self-preservation, maybe we do it to gain the upper hand or avoid discomfort. But inevitably, deception ends up only delaying the inevitable and making it even more complicated to move toward health.

In addition to avoiding deception, Paul said he wasn't going to "distort the word of God."

## **Distortion**

When the military takes an ordinary chemical and adapts it so that it becomes lethal, they say the chemical has been weaponized. I think of distortion as a way of weaponizing the truth. It takes what is authentic and twists it so that it is harmful rather than helpful.

What makes the truth dangerous is when we superimpose our own agendas onto it and use it for our own purposes, rather than letting the truth speak for itself.

This happens in relationships all the time. You take something your spouse has done or said, and you turn it around and use it against them when you want something from them. Truth becomes leverage.

You can distort the truth through exaggeration, making the other person sound like they are way out of line. “You’re the only person in the world who likes to talk all the time. Can’t we ever just be quiet?” “You want me to change into a totally different person.”

You can distort the truth through taking things out of context. Jesus’ critics even did this. “He says he can rebuild the temple in 3 days.”

You can distort the truth by holding on to it too long. That argument that happened two weeks ago didn’t really matter all that much, but it makes an excellent weapon to club someone with when you need the upper hand.

You can distort the truth by getting ultra-literal. One Sunday when I was young, my dad told my brother he didn’t want him running around outside after church, which is what he always did. And sure enough, my brother headed straight outside that Sunday too. My dad confronted him on it and my brother replied, “You said not to run around. I was walking.”

However we distort truth, we’re doing it with an agenda. We’re inserting our own messages which twist the original intent. And that makes reality harder to identify.

What do my relationships look like? Am I using people, having conversations with them just to get something I want from them? How am I using the truth? Distortion robs us of relationship by injecting hidden motives in everything we do.

Secrecy. Shame. Deception. Distortion. These are all ways that diminish our ability to be authentic. And they are not the true work of the author. Paul counters each one of them with what God’s work DOES look like. The first statement he makes is this:

*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*

## **Freedom**

I love that verse! This is the direct opposite of secrecy, because secrecy locks us away and makes us want to hide.

Praise God he’s all about freedom! He wants us out of the basement where secrecy has us trapped. If you’ve ever confessed something you’ve been carrying for a long time, you know how liberating it can be. There is a weight that is lifted when we don’t have to cover something up anymore. We tell ourselves how awful it will be when the truth comes out, but the opposite is true. Being authentic sets us free. Being real sets us free.

And instead of living with an overwhelming sense of shame, Paul says we are

*being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory*

## **Transformation**

The opposite of shame is glory and honor – being valued for who we are. There is more to being real than just opening up and sharing the raw parts of our lives with each other. We believe that God can take that stuff and transform it – making it new. In the process of gaining freedom, we also watch the shame be completely overhauled. Time and time again, God takes the things that makes us feel crummy about ourselves and uses them to show his power in our lives.

Maybe you feel like you can't escape shame because you can't change your history. You've made your mistakes and you feel like you have to live with them.

Christ is saying to you this morning, "I want to trade histories with you. I'll take what you did. I'll bear the guilt the shame the judgment – everything. And I'll give you my history. My death on the cross is now your death. The punishment is over. God looks at you and doesn't see your past – he sees mine."

That's transformation. The more we can give over our past to Christ, the more he can free us from it and lift the shame from our shoulders. Is this an easy thing to do? No. Sometimes it's a daily exercise in choosing to believe what God says over messages we've internalized since birth. Is it worth the struggle? Freedom always is.

The Message version captures this really well in translating the words of Paul to the Galatians.

### **Galatians 2:19-21**

*What actually took place is this: I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God, and it didn't work. So I quit being a "law man" so that I could be God's man. Christ's life showed me how, and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not "mine," but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I am not going to go back on that.*

Learning to be authentic also means moving away from deception, and that can only take us to truth. As Paul said it in this passage, they were

*...setting forth the truth plainly...*

## **Truth**

I talked to several people this week who all were coming to grips with truths about themselves that they hadn't wanted to acknowledge before. They were all letting go of deception. And that takes courage. W.H. Auden once wrote,

*We would rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the day and watch our illusions die.*

It's the hardest thing in the world to be honest with yourself about yourself. But that's a sign of the Holy Spirit's activity in our lives. It's a mark of authenticity. Jesus told his disciples,

**John 16:13**

*But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.*

I like that image of a guide, because it makes me think of a pathway and a process. The Spirit doesn't just dump truth in our laps – he guides us into it as we walk along through life. We don't even realize the depth of how deceived we are, and the Holy Spirit just keeps gently prodding us further and further into the truth.

Finally, Paul also counters distortion.

When Karin and I were newly married, we got a great deal on a mirror. It was super cheap, which was all we could afford, so we were happy. Then we got it home and hung it up, and we discovered why it was such a bargain. There was some wacky distortion going on in it. Now I wouldn't mind if it had made me look a few pounds thinner, or a little taller, but this was just the kind of distortion that made everything look like it was warped and slightly askew – not even interesting enough to be in a fun house.

All we wanted was straight reflection instead of distortion. And that's what Paul hold up as a marker of authenticity.

*And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory...*

**Reflection**

We aren't supposed to manipulate and twist the truth. We aren't supposed to approach relationships with hidden agendas. We are to have our lives reflect Christ. His light and glory can then do their own work, shining in dark corners and doing what they will.

So we trade secrecy for freedom, shame for transformation, deception for truth and distortion for reflection. And it is as we move toward the right hand side of the page that we grow into authenticity with that ever increasing glory Paul talks about.

So how do we live out this value as a congregation? How do we become a safe place for everyone who is struggling while at the same time encouraging people to move toward greater authenticity?

The key will be in avoiding the same things Paul avoided. If we say we want to be an authentic church, that means we'll strive for transparency in the way we handle our business – no secrecy in the way we operate. That means when people come in who are struggling, we won't pile shame on them, because God is a remover of shame and we're all fellow strugglers. And we'll be careful to not misuse the truth to manipulate people.

By the way – it's not a smile that covers a multitude of sins. Peter wrote and said

**1 Peter 4:8**

*Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.*

Being authentic isn't pretending none of us has problems – it's learning to genuinely love each other while we still have the flaws. Because that's the way Christ loved us.

Where in my life am I needing greater authenticity? Which one of those four signs of unreality am I struggling with the most? There is a better life waiting, one where I am accepted and loved as I am, one where I can become more of what God intended me to be. Christ didn't come to make us more religious – he came to make us more human. Am I ready to be authentic? Let's be a church that looks like the author intended. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.