Are you a pretender? Whoa, that is a way to start a sermon! Well, as a matter of fact, all of us are pretenders in one way or another. The reasons? Either we want to be liked, accepted, included, and not judged, or we don’t want anyone to know we have struggles. All of which are reasons to put a façade that we believe others may find attractive to get their approval and acceptance.

For example, we may think, “I am not enough just the way I am,” “I am not as smart,” “I am not one of them,” “What would they say if they knew…” etc., telling ourselves we are not like the others or not enough. Therefore, we need to pretend to fit in.

We do this at work, school, church, and even within our family. At church, for example, when someone is looking for a church, they want to know how people dress (can I afford to dress like that?); what is expected (do I bring a Bible or not?); or if they are going to be welcomed because of their race, culture, language, tattoos, etc. So, they do their research and get themselves ready to fit in.

In other words, the idea is that by conforming to what everyone else is or does, we deflect as much attention from ourselves as possible because we don’t want to be singled out.

This is not surprising. We start acting like this since the early ages of our childhood. In many ways, it is a defense mechanism to protect us from judgment and exclusion, a sort of “make-believe” façade because we have this idea that unless we act, look, and behave in specific ways, we are not going to be accepted. Or, if people knew our struggles, they would be horrified. So, we deceive ourselves and those around us.

Now, conformity is not intrinsically wrong; it could be healthy in some instances. For example, when it involves values and common decency. However, the issue is forfeiting who we are for conformity. This is not what life is supposed to be. The gift of life should not be squandered by pretending to be what we are not or that we are fine when we are not.

This is particularly relevant when raising children nowadays with so much social pressure on them to conform due to social media thinking they must look, speak, and act in certain ways to be “cool.”

How often do we hear of young people behaving in harmful ways because of social pressure? It is as if it is forbidden to be different, unique, ask questions, and have a different way of thinking and seeing things. YOU MUST CONFORM OR ELSE!

What do we do, then? How do we live in this world without losing ourselves? What does the Bible teach us about being confident about who God created us to be?

There is a Bible story about a man who rejected conformity and was not afraid to be real and honest with himself and those around him. This man is Thomas. Here is the story from John 20:24-29,

But Thomas, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

This event is happening a week after the resurrection (Easter). Thomas was one of the twelve disciples that Jesus called to follow him. The issue here is that when Jesus appeared to the disciples for the first time, Thomas was not with them, so he missed him. To this, he said, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

With this statement, Thomas was not pretending to believe when he did not. He was not faking to have the certainty the others had just to fit in. On the contrary, he had genuine concerns, and he was not ashamed to make them known. Hid doubt was not evil skepticism but an honest inquiry.

This was so Thomas. It was not the first time he stood out among the disciples. In John 11, Lazarus, a dear friend of Jesus, had died in Bethany—a suburb of Jerusalem. When Jesus learned about it, he decided to go to Bethany, but his disciples reminded him that the religious leaders tried to stone him to death the last time he went near Jerusalem. It would be suicidal to go back, so they tried to change his mind.

But Thomas spoke up and said, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (John 11:16). When everyone else was bailing out on Jesus, Thomas did not surrender to social pressure and told Jesus, “I am with you no matter what.”

Then, John’s gospel mentions Thomas one other time before the crucifixion. It is Thursday night in the Upper Room. Jesus has just washed the disciples’ feet and given them the great command to love one another. And then he said,

I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place I am going (John 14:1-4).

Thomas had been listening carefully, and in a moment of great honesty, he said, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” (John 14:5).

The rest of the disciples were just perplexed listening to Jesus (I can imagine them nodding their heads as if they knew what Jesus was talking about), but only Thomas dared to ask him what he was talking about. He did not pretend to know nor was afraid to show his lack of understanding. Instead, he was honest about what he knew or did not know.

As we can see, Thomas was a disciple that kept it real. He was brave and honest to say, “I don’t get it. Until I see Jesus, I can’t pretend I believe what you tell me.” He wasn’t giving up his faith, but he refused to be a pretender. Thomas had the integrity to say, “I’m not there yet; I need help with my faith.”

Can you imagine the courage it took for him to speak up and overcome the fear of being judged or excluded? But because he was honest and authentic, he found himself in a way that wouldn’t have happened in any other way. His honesty was a stepping stone to greater faith.

What happens when we pretend to be okay or do what everyone else is doing to fit in—and we don’t even like it? We lose ourselves. By trying to be like others, we miss our shot in life. Using Jesus’ words, “What does it profit [us] if [we] gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit [ourselves]?” (Luke 9:25)

What a terrible loss is to live pretending to be okay or a different kind of person just to fit in, only to realize the terrible mistake at the end of our days and say, “What have I done? That was not me!”

How much of what you do, say, or even think is you? How much of it is “make-believe” to give the appearance that you don’t have issues?

The story of Thomas is a great story and example about overcoming the pressure to be like others or pretending we are fine (when we are not) just for the looks.

Here is the good news of what happens when we are honest and authentic: God meets us where we are and takes us to the next level.

We see that in this story. When Jesus appeared to the disciples a second time, Thomas was with them, and he spoke to him, saying, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe” (John 20:27).

Jesus knew all about Thomas’ doubts and didn’t put him down. Instead, he met him where he was, saying, “Go ahead. See for yourself. Stop doubting and believe.” And Thomas saw and believed; he was raised to a full, confiding faith as he exclaimed, “My Lord and my God!”

I hope we can read between the lines here: We lose ourselves and waste so much of who we are for fear of being judged and excluded. By pretending we are fine, we miss the opportunity to find knowledge, healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, or whatever our concern or need may be. The way to life fulfillment and finding ourselves and purpose in life is by being honest with ourselves and God.

If Thomas had pretended to be like the others, he would not have seen Jesus as he did, and perhaps he would have taken his doubts with him to the grave. A terrible sadness. But because he was honest and authentic, he attained the fullest and firmest belief anyone can hope for.

My friends, God did not create you with all your peculiarities, quirks, and weirdness so that you would give it away trying to be like someone else. Your value as a person does not come from conformity. Too often, we get caught up in trying to be like someone else we forget how special we are. Oscar Wilde once said, “Be yourself, everyone else is taken.”

So, here is the invitation. There is only one you, and you only live once; don’t waste any of it. Don’t live somebody else’s life but the one God gave you. You have your unique talents and qualities. Discover and embrace them, and use them to create something unique, something so you. (Just, don’t go crazy or be a jerk.)

But most importantly, and this is critical, and without it, nothing else matters: Root your whole self with confidence in being a child of God. And don’t be afraid of letting others see you the way God made you as you continue to find yourself as a disciple of Jesus, growing in his character. Our success and fulfillment in life depend on embracing who God created us to be.