



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 15 – Proper 17 Year B

Hypocrites

[RCL]: Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

The church is full of hypocrites. Ever heard that? I hear it all the time. It usually comes from folks who are anxious to justify the neglect of their own religious duties by dumping on church folks. At first glance, it seems a well-aimed attack, too. After all, Jesus is very hard on hypocrites, in fact, he is harder on them than he is on anybody else. We just had a good example of that in the Gospel, where Jesus once more climbs all over the Pharisees and scribes, the official religious leaders of the day. So, if the church really is full of hypocrites, we have a problem—and we should probably fire a bunch of churchgoers, or go out of business, or *something*.

But before we do that, it's a good idea to take a minute and look at what Jesus was talking about when he talked about hypocrites. This is one of those words that is surprisingly hard to get a grip on, and that we need to spend a little extra time with. What we usually mean when we use the word is most likely not what Jesus meant when he used it.

Today's dictionary says that hypocrites are people who are playing a part, people who deliberately pretend to have beliefs and virtues that they, in fact, do not have at all, and which the hypocrites both know they don't have and don't particularly want to have. Hypocrites in this sense are people who are faking it and who know they are faking it. The point is deception. (In fact, the word comes from acting a part in a play). Hypocrisy in this sense is really vicious. It's a misuse of religious faith and it mocks God and his Church. Doubtless, it greatly grieves the Lord. But two other things need to be said about this sense of hypocrisy. First, the Church is not full of this kind of hypocrite and, second, this isn't what Jesus was talking about, anyway.

About the first thing: It just isn't true. Most church people, indeed virtually all the church people I know, believe what they say they believe, or they *want* to believe it, or they are *trying* to believe it, or they wish they could believe it. And, truth be told, that's as good as it gets.

In the same way, most church people I know are living by their best take on the moral precepts of our faith, or they are trying to, or they want to, or they know deeply both the struggle that comes with

contending with God and the weight of judgment that brings. Nobody gets it right all the time; everybody gets it wrong more often than necessary; anybody and everybody can do better. But outright, deliberate faking the whole business to seem good while planning to be bad—this is rare, and I think we ought to realize that, and say that, and celebrate that. The church is not full of that sort of hypocrite. The church *is* full of sinners—but that’s another matter entirely—and that’s as it should be.

Now, in the light of all that, I’m not sure whether or not it’s good news that, when Jesus condemned hypocrites and hypocrisy, he was not talking about this, but about something else. You see, the notion of acting a part was a Greek notion, and there are really no Hebrew or Aramaic parallels to this idea of hypocrisy. So, we don’t know what Aramaic word Jesus used that the Gospel writers translated as the Greek word *hypocrite*. Still, the best way I know to get at what Jesus was probably talking about is by way of an old Zen story.

Once upon a time, the great Zen master Sasha was standing with a friend at the top of a tall tower. His friend looked down the road and saw a line of saffron-robed monks walking toward them. “Look,” his friend said to Sasha, “Holy men.”

“Those aren’t holy men,” Sasha said, “and I can prove it to you.” So, they waited in silence until the monks were walking directly below the tower.

Then Sasha leaned over the tower’s rail and called down, “Hey, holy men.” The monks all looked up—and Sasha turned to his friend and said, “See?”

Those monks were exactly what Jesus meant when he talked about hypocrites. So were the Pharisees and scribes. Jesus does not attack the Pharisees and scribes for pretending to be good when they were really evil. The vast majority of them were not evil.

Instead, Jesus castigates them because their self-righteous convictions about their own goodness had built a smug wall around them, isolated them from the rest of the community, and made them deaf to any further word from God.

The Pharisees kept the law and keeping the law—the moral law and the religious law—is a good thing. We should do that. But to believe and act like your own righteousness in the sight of God comes to you *because* you keep the law—this is absolutely deadly, and it is the heart of what Jesus means by hypocrisy.

To cultivate within yourself moral virtues and behavior which not everyone around you cultivates is, again, a good thing. Indeed, it’s a distinctive mark of the Christian life. But to believe and act like your own righteousness in the sight of God comes to you because you are more virtuous than most people you know—or more virtuous than some other group, or some specific other person—this is what Jesus insisted was far more evil than the particulars of any individual sinner.

There is only one place to look if we want to find out how good we are, or how righteous we are—only one place. That place is God—God’s absolute goodness, God’s absolute justice, God’s absolute demands, and, finally, God’s absolute love and mercy.

If we look to ourselves for our righteousness, if we look to the things we have done, or the rules we have kept or the law we obey—or if we look to the failings of others (and say, “at least I’m not like *them*”)—if we do that, if we try to find in ourselves, or in others, the answer to how good we are or how righteous we are—if we do that, then we are who Jesus is talking about when he talks about hypocrites.

To be sure, it’s a good and important thing to obey the law and to live the life we are called to live. None of this talk of hypocrisy excuses moral or religious failing, nor does it mean that the way we behave doesn’t matter. The way we behave matters a lot, for a bunch of reasons. Deuteronomy today talks about how God’s people are to live in such a way that the world around them can look at them and be drawn to God. And Paul talks about how every speck of virtue we can nurture is absolutely essential if we are to live our calling.

At the same time, when Jesus condemns the hypocrites, he is not talking about evil people who pretend. He is talking about well-behaved people who trust in themselves, who consider themselves finished products, and so cannot see or hear either themselves or God very well.

Now, I don’t think the church is particularly full of this sort of hypocrite, either; but we’re far from immune. And Jesus thought it was dreadfully important, so we have to pay especially close attention and keep alert.

Remember Sasha in the tower and those monks. And remember that our trust, and our hope, and our confidence, can be found in only one place—it is never in ourselves—it is always in the love and the mercy of God.

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