

HYPOCRITE

Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21

Hypocrite. The word appears over and over again in our Gospel lesson. (Verse 2) The hypocrite announces his generosity with trumpets. (Verse 5) The hypocrite loves to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. (Verse 16) The hypocrite looks somber and disfigures his face to show others he is fasting.

The hypocrite wants to look righteous. The hypocrite wants the world to think he is a role model, an example to be followed, someone who has himself under control and is living a life of integrity and honor.

But the reality is something much different. In truth, the hypocrite lives a life that contradicts his confession – a life that is not congruent with his appearances. There are skeletons in his closet – dirt swept under the carpet – lies that have mounted up.

Some of you can see that my house is being re-sided. One of the main reasons for this has been water damage that seeped down the outside of my chimney. While the boards looked good on the outside, the woodpeckers knew that there was something underneath – rot and water damage that had taken the plywood and turned it to mush.

That's the hypocrite, my friends. On the outside well-respected, perhaps even honored as someone of virtue. But on the inside, mush – a bundle of lies and a life of inconsistency.

Do you know a hypocrite?

That's been the news over the last months, hasn't it? Larry Nasser the sexual predator. Rob Porter, Mormon Elder, now purported wife abuser. Bill Cosby was hardly Dr. Cliff Huxtable. Charlie Rose didn't end up smelling like one. Lance Armstrong doped his way to victory. And the list has grown exponentially as closets are being opened and truths being told.

Presidents. Kings. Popes. Princes. Athletes. Teachers. Doctors. Preachers. CEO's and PhD's. It's easy to point fingers and say, "Yes, that one is a fraud. This one is a phony. She is a liar. He is a cheat." The airwaves are chattering with such news every single day.

But Jesus' goal in pointing out what hypocrisy looks like was not to expose the Pharisees and teachers of the law as frauds. While, in many cases it may have done so, it was hardly the reaction Jesus intended. His point was to turn the pointing fingers away from their emphasis on others and to encourage those fingers to point back toward ourselves.

I asked earlier. Do you know a hypocrite? And Jesus would want us not to say, "yes," and turn on the TV or read People Magazine. He would want us to say, "yes," and look in the mirror. Because, in truth, that's what sin has made us all. Hypocrites. We say we want to follow God. We say we want to obey His commands. We come to church. We read His Word. We fold our hands and bow our heads.

But at home we curse and swear. Behind the scenes we mistreat the people we say we love. We are selfish with our resources. Jealous of our neighbor. Our tempers get the better of us. Our passions are drawn to addictive vices. Or maybe it's the gossip. Or maybe it's the discontent. Or maybe it's the indifferent attitude we have about serving God, serving others, reaching out.

Oh, my friends, brothers and sisters in Christ. (holding up ashes) This is it. Let's be honest. We are dust. Ashes. Our insides are like my chimney – full of stuff that we're not proud of – full of inconsistencies, immoralities, lies, cover-ups – we are, so often, people who prefer the darkness – who do not want to be exposed.

But please notice what our Epistle says. God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. Let me say it again: God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

You see, brothers and sisters, God knows it all – before Him every nook and cranny is laid bare – every closet opened – every carpet overturned. Under His watch, the hypocrite cannot hide, the phony cannot run away, the insincere one cannot escape. No. The fingers point as us and expose who we are.

But, in Christ, our Loving Heavenly Father takes the soot of our iniquity, the ashes of our failure, the cinders of our inconsistency and transforms them into the sign of the cross. Because it is the cross and He who hung there that enables hypocrites like us to be able to stand before the Perfect One.

This is what Lent's all about, my friends. The text makes it plain. It's not about your piety, it's about His mercy. It's not about your acts of righteousness, it's about Him who made us righteous by taking on our impurity and paying its consequences. It's not about how we live, it's about what He gave.

So please don't use this season to try and justify yourself to yourself by pledges and promises and disciplines and exercises. Please don't let yourself get drawn into the misapplication of God's Word as a code of ethics or a revelation of God's moral requirements by which you can climb the ladder toward Him.

Instead, turn your eyes to the cross and remember that if He didn't go there, this (ashes) is your destiny. As we will say, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, from dust were you made and to dust you shall return."

But He did go there. He traveled the road which He was called to walk, faithfully, willingly, painfully – so that you and I might walk in newness of life.

So take a look in the mirror when you get home and see the precious, beautiful one there who has been clothed with the righteousness of Christ. Give thanks for "that one" who has been adopted and grafted into the blood-line of Jesus and who has been offered here tonight the very body and blood that ran through His body. Let the cross you see be His Valentine to you tonight. For how great is His love – for sinners like us.

May God's Spirit enable us all to grow through our journey with Him again the year. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.