



Hypocrisy and the Heart

August 30, 2021: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Fourteenth Sunday after
Pentecost

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord: May Your Word only be spoken, and may Your Word only be heard; in the Name of Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Amen.

In Mark's Gospel this morning, Jesus calls the Pharisees "hypocrites." For a parent, there is perhaps no more frequent or stinging accusation, than be called a "hypocrite" by one's children. As a parent, that may be why I believe the Spirit is asking me to explore hypocrisy with you today.

First, a word in defense of the Pharisees, an important group of Jewish leaders in Jesus' time. The Gospels often show them in a less than flattering light. Recall that Jesus's first followers were Jews who were kicked out of the synagogues. Losing that battle, the Jesus followers ultimately "won" the war, so to speak. Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and ultimately the dominant religion in the West. Consequently, at times inaccurate accounts of the Jewish teachings of their ancestors were collected into the Gospel narratives.

Furthermore, the Pharisees desired to make it possible to live as faithful Jews in the mundane circumstances of everyday life in the midst of the foreign occupation by the Romans. One need not be a priest sacrificing at the Jerusalem Temple to encounter the living God. This was a good thing.

In this instance, the ritual washing of hands before eating mimicked the ritual cleanliness preparation of the priests in the Temple before the sacrifices began. Before an encounter with the Living God, it was appropriate to prepare by being clean.

Having said that, Jesus calls them hypocrites. Why?

In a section that the Lectionary inexplicably leaves out of today's passage, Jesus describes a scenario in which traditions which purport to honor God, actually undermine the divine command to honor one's father and mother. Jesus goes on to quote Isaiah to emphasize that these leaders have allowed external rituals to distance their hearts from the compassion of God. The Greek word translated as hypocrite in Jesus' time had come to mean the role of an actor: one who spoke the lines given to him on the stage. But as we know, the lines the actor speaks on the stage do not direct his action off of it, in real life. For Jesus, the implication was one whose words were empty, were disconnected from his actions, whose motivations were superficial, whose hearts were far from God.

We know people like this. In fact, we are people like this. Our actions do not match what we say. Our walk does not match our talk. Our hearts need help.



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Each of us has responsibility for our actions “out there” [gesture to the congregation and beyond] that begin “in here.” [gesture to my chest]. These actions emerge from the ferment of the heart. Jesus lists just a few: theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly—the manifestations of all of these, and more, emerge from the thoughts of our hearts.

In the ancient world, the heart stood not just for the seat of physical life and the home of the emotions, but the abode of the will as well. It was where the character of a person dwelt.

So, the site of healing for one whose deeds do not match their words, whose broken thoughts and motivations lead to sinful actions, is the heart. And the God who created us in love waits for us to be honest with ourselves first, and then others, about where our thoughts and intentions lie. God waits to forgive us and give us new life to try again.

There was a wonderful cartoon in a recent issue of the New Yorker magazine. A person approaches two confession booths in a church. One is labeled Confessions; the other is labeled Excuses.

https://www.newyorker.com/cartoon/a25181?utm_source=onsite-share&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=onsite-share&utm_brand=the-new-yorker

We have to be real about what our personal role is in systems—family systems, social systems. We need to look within our hearts at our sins, rather than project our sins out onto others. As the comic book possum Pogo once said, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

Now here is where we suggest that sin is not the *same* as hypocrisy, though we could say hypocrisy is a sin, a sign of brokenness and separation from God and one another.

Where sin differs from hypocrisy is this; Eugene Peterson helps me in this explanation. A hypocrite is not a person who claims to be a Christian and at the same time sins. All of us do that, even the finest saints. Hypocrites are those who spend their time ritualizing the religious life, but have no intention of living it, ever. Hypocrites are not interested in working out the life of faith in intimate relationships and personal actions. Hypocrites do not sin more than others; they pretend more. Hypocrites don’t fail more often; they do, however, fake it more often. (Eugene Peterson, *Like Dew Your Youth: Growing Up with Your Teenager*, pp. 69-70)

Please join me in praying a portion of Psalm 51, found on p. 137 in the Prayer Book. There is no better prayer to begin and continue the process of not being a hypocrite.



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*Open my lips O Lord,
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your holy spirit from me.
Give me the joy of your saving help again,
and sustain me with your bountiful spirit.*

*Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.
As it was in the beginning is now and will be forever,
Amen.*