

Reformation Sunday, Oct. 30, 2011

Jesus accuses the religious leaders of his day of hypocrisy, of talking the talk but not walking the walk or the talk. Unfortunately, the actions of the Pharisees and scribes speak louder than words. "If you want to know what a person believes, watch his feet, not his mouth." This is another way to speak of "walking the talk," of being true to who we claim to be. Who among us has not had a parent or teacher say, "Do as I say, not as I do" when caught in a bit of inconsistency? Who among us has not said the same of ourselves, or perhaps should have? Maybe there was a parenting manual published sometime after World War II that had a chapter devoted to what to do when the kids start to notice a gap between the rules as being taught and the sometimes imperfect lives of the teachers. "Do as I say and not as I do" must have been intended to acknowledge that a) parents are human, but b) they're still in charge, c) parents make and break the rules, but it is not the child's responsibility to point this out, and d) it is the child's job to follow the rules that even parents sometimes break because this builds character. The sad facts of life are that sometimes Mom won't wear an overcoat when it's cold out, might not always eat her vegetables, and may even leave a room without shutting the light off first.

But Jesus is going a little farther here than merely pointing out inconsistencies in adult leaders. The Pharisees and scribes, Jesus seems to say, are fake religious leaders. Texan Molly Ivins described "people who want to be Texans but aren't": they're "all hat and no cattle." Pretend cowboys. The Pharisees and scribes, Jesus says, are "all hat and no cattle," or all robes and titles and no God, all fringes and phylacteries, and no real grasp of the Word of God and its spirit.

We might spend a little time here, as Matthew does, pondering the hypocrisy and pride of the religious leaders of Jesus' time. We care, of course, about our own reputations, our place in society, and "saving face" is important to us. But in Jesus' culture, in the Mediterranean world of the first century, honor was a thing of huge importance. The seat of Moses was the special throne from which a religious leader made wise judgments and pronouncements. It was a great honor to sit in this seat. Just as it is an honor to be a judge today, and we therefore say "your honor." But honor can transform into pride in unseemly and unhealthy ways. When even religious leaders who are sincerely trying to do the right thing succumb to this temptation to think more highly of themselves than they ought to think, along comes a prophet, sooner or later, to put them back on track.

Tom Long explains the problem that provoked Jesus' anger, the burdens that the Pharisees imposed on the people, "a myriad of rules, standards, and directives, and the whole process easily degenerated into moral bean counting. The procedures were so cumbersome that no human being could possibly accomplish them; no one could ever hope to keep the full weight of all these laws and carry the heavy freight of this ethical load, not even the scribes and the Pharisees themselves" (*Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion*). Matthew's Greek word that we read as "hypocrites" is actually translated literally as "actors." What an image for hypocrisy – acting! Pretend righteousness. Paul later pointed out that the problem was not just the Pharisees' because nobody could keep the law and thereby justify himself. (He knew, because he was one, as he put it, "a Pharisee of Pharisees".) Jesus goes on to say, a few verses beyond today's text, that these pretenders, these actors, these hypocrites are "blind guides." Close your eyes a moment and reflect on that accusation. Blind guide.

But of course Jesus isn't going off on the scribes and Pharisees as a separate class of people who alone succumb to the temptation to twist honor into pride. It is a universal spiritual problem. Followers of Jesus must not in any way consider themselves above others. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. The first shall be last and the last first. The greatest among us are the servants of all. Blessed are the meek, the poor in spirit, the pure in heart. Ours must not be a pyramid or hierarchical system in the church. Advancement in our faith is not an upward mobility but a downward mobility. That's why you don't catch me using the title "Reverend." It has always struck me as wrapped in broad phylacteries and draped with long fringes. In mockery some of us in the clerical profession refer to one another as "your holiness" or "the very most reverend eminence." When one of my friends calls me "Reverend" I shoot back and call him "More Reverent" which then goes to "Most Reverend" and so on. There are only two instances in Matthew where Jesus is addressed as "rabbi" and one of these is when Judas kisses him in betrayal.

We preachers need to beware of praise. One had the following conversation with a spouse on the way home from church: "Tell me, dear, how many truly great preachers do you think there are today?" The humbling spouse replied, "I don't know but I am sure it is one less than you think." Another colleague got this backhand compliment at the door on the way out from worship, "Pastor, each sermon is better than the next."

Humility is a good thing, to a point: When it becomes a source of pride. As one of my teachers liked to put it and I like to repeat, "I am proud of my humility."

Today we remember that October eve of All Saints day in 1517, when a young Augustinian monk named Luther posted 95 theses on the Wittenberg church door. Luther is credited with starting the religious, political and cultural revolution we now remember as the Protestant Reformation of the Sixteenth Century. Besides helping to upset the applecart of the Roman Catholic Church in Europe, Luther was a prolific writer and the collection of his works runs to 55 volumes in English and many more in German editions. His translation of the Bible into the language of the people is often regarded by historians alongside Guttenberg's invention of the printing press as a turning point that brought the medieval world to an end and ushered in the modern era. Luther was modest as to the importance of his writings. When printers encouraged him to publish, he replied with humility:

*I'll never consent to this proposal of yours. I'd rather that all my books would disappear and the Holy Scriptures alone would be read. Otherwise we'll rely on such writings and let the Bible go.... I wonder who encourages this mania for writing! Who wants to buy such stout tomes? And if they're bought, who'll read them? And if they're read, who'll be edified by them?*

There was a time when churches like ours would use this day to say "thank God for Luther and Calvin and Zwingli and those many Reformers who cleaned up the church and saved us from being Catholic." But nearly five hundred years have taught us a bit more humility, and now we are all too aware of the sins of pride and division which have plagued the Protestant movement. Some traditions have taken to observing a day of Reconciliation rather than Reformation. Let's take Jesus as our guide, along with Luther and Catholic office of the pope that Luther so strongly condemned, and find the common ground that is there, right in one of the pope's titles: servant of a servant church. This is the common, humble level where we all belong.

Eugene Peterson's translation of Jesus' words in Matthew brings this together simply and clearly: "Do you want to stand out? Then step down. Be a servant...if you're content to simply be yourself, your life will count for plenty" (*The Message*).