

Remembering to Forget

Ash Wednesday
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

Wednesday, February 17, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Matthew 6:1-6

Once upon a time, a woman called her local Humane Society to report that she could not keep the cat she had recently gotten from them. "I'm very fond of the sweet thing," she told them, "but he will not stop killing the birds in our yard, and I just cannot have a bird killer around my house. I'm sorry for your trouble, and I'm sure my husband will be happy to make a contribution to the Society as soon as he gets back from duck hunting."

Hypocrites. It's hard to find anyone who has a kind word to say about them. Nobody likes a hypocrite and the last thing any of us would want to be called is one. Hypocrites are, by definition, deceptive, two-faced and treacherous. In fact, the word "hypocrite" was originally a theatrical term, describing actors who concealed their real countenances behind dramatic masks.

The sin of hypocrisy, then, is wearing a mask, and in our time and culture no sin seems more contemptible. Religious hypocrites are, of course, the worst of the breed; at least we think so most days, because we expect more from those who claim to be disciples of Jesus.

And if we want to be hard on religious hypocrites in particular, we seem to have a natural ally in Jesus. Throughout scripture, Jesus has harsh words for those who wear the garments of religion, but who have no time for those whose garments are soiled or stained because of life. He had harsh words for those who can sit down with the rich, but who won't stand up for the poor; for those who pray long for themselves, but who don't stay long with others; for those who have time for their own people, but who step to the other side of the road to avoid the "foreigner."

With rollicking humor, Jesus mocked hypocrites as clowns of their own moral vaudeville show. As Jesus described them in our Gospel text assigned for Ash Wednesday, hypocrites want the trumpeter to play "Hey Look Me Over" when they pull out their offering envelopes; they conduct prayer meetings at busy intersections during rush hour; and on fast days they put on a melancholy public face that makes them look for all the world like they have the flu. In short, according to our text from the Sermon of the Mount, they parade their deeds with a flourish before the admiring eyes of others. That's what they want, and that's what they get -- indeed, the problem is that the adoration of the crowd is *all* they get. "Truly I tell you," Jesus says, "They have received their reward."

So, Jesus obviously does not tolerate hypocrites, and neither do we. So much for hypocrisy. Can I get an "Amen," and we can call it a day?

Well . . . maybe we'd better take another look at this issue before we just assume that Jesus agrees with our judgments. To be sure, the hypocrites that Jesus takes on are people who are somehow missing the boat in their religious life, in their almsgiving,

prayer and fasting, but that is not to say that there is nothing to them. Indeed, it must be acknowledged that they *are* people who give their money to the poor, who pray and who fast. When he takes off after hypocrites, Jesus is not talking about people who thumb their noses at the synagogue or the church, and he is not talking even about those who show up for worship but sit passively on their hands as if watching a show for their entertainment. To the contrary, Jesus is talking about people every faith community desperately needs, people who actually put the faith into practice. They are numbered among those who fill out a pledge card, volunteer around the church, serve on committees, show up for worship, and pray for others.

In summary, in order, it seems, to qualify in Jesus' book as a hypocrite one has to be what every church wants and needs -- an active member. Hypocrites may have doubts and questions about what they teach in Sunday school, but they teach. Hypocrites may demand brass plaques to mark their contributions, but they do give. Hypocrites may use flowery, pious language when they pray for others, but they pray. Hypocrites may let it be known that they volunteer once a month for Meals on Wheels, but they show up. Maybe before we dismiss them out of hand, we need to give two cheers for all those hypocrites, not quite three cheers, but applause and appreciation for their efforts nonetheless.

And that is the hub of the problem -- the applause. You see, Jesus does not attack religious hypocrisy because those folks are ruthlessly opposed to the Gospel but rather because they just barely miss what the Gospel is all about. The praying, fasting, almsgiving hypocrites of Jesus' day were not headed in the wrong direction; they were on the right path, but they did not take their faith far enough. They go only part of the way; they are willing to settle for the minimum wage of human adulation when so very near -- just past themselves, in fact -- lies the real treasure -- the affirmation and intimacy of God. And all they had to do was to take that step where they forget about themselves for a while and get lost in their serving for the sake of the other. Wrapped around themselves, hypocrites are condemned to parade around in front of the only audience left to impress -- other people.

So what of Jesus reprimand? Like all of Jesus judgments, it is meant to reclaim those who are lost, not to destroy. Always, always, underneath the reproach of Jesus is the promise that God desires all to draw near in mercy to his love and grace. And all we need to remember is to forget -- forget about ourselves in service; forget about the roar of the crowd's approval; forget about the spotlight long enough to see the hurting ones hiding in the shadows of our lives.

Hypocrites. We loath them publicly, don't we? And yet . . . and yet we know deep inside ourselves that that loathing is pointed at ourselves as well. We all live in pretense. We all wear masks. We all hide ourselves and delude ourselves with our pieties. We all stand in need of grace and forgiveness for living, for none of us stands worthy before our Lord and Savior.

And so, we have come to this place -- where hypocrites all can hear the redemptive words of forgiveness and find ourselves renewed for the service we would seek to render to God and fail to do time and time again because our very nature is sinful and unclean; for by our very natures we will turn in on ourselves again and again. Here it is that we

have come to confess that sinful nature, and receive new marching orders for service, knowing our need of God's love, grace and forgiveness and our utter lack of self-sufficiency that we think we can claim.

Bishop Jim Goodson tells the story of a sermon in which he made a passing remark about church hypocrites that was broadcast on the local radio station. While walking downtown that week he was approached by someone who said that he had heard the sermon, and did he know that there were hypocrites in his church. Feigning surprise, Pastor Goodson, tongue-in-cheek, responded that he thought all the hypocrites were over in the First Baptist Church.

"No," the man said, "There are hypocrites in your pews and I know who they are." At which point the man began to name 12 members of Pastor Goodson's church who were friends of the pastor. So, the pastor replied to the man that he had a good list.

"Okay, but what are you going to do about them?" the man demanded.

"Well," Pastor Goodson replied, "I'm going to throw those people out of the church."

The man was suspicious and looked the pastor in the eye and said that he didn't think he had the guts to throw them out.

"Oh, yes, I'm going to throw them out. I've even set a date for when I'm going to do it."

The man's curiosity was piqued just a bit, so he asked just when this event would take place.

And Pastor Goodson told the man, "I'm going to throw all the hypocrites out of the church on the day that the hospital refuses to admit sick people."

We are all pretenders, hypocrites, if you will. None of us is worthy to merit God's favor. But God continues to be gracious toward us, calling us to a better way, and forgiving us again and again in spite of our pretense.

Perhaps, then, Jesus reprimands the hypocrites because only a sharply pointed rebuke can poke a hole in the facade we all hide behind, allowing just enough light of the Gospel to stream through with the news that every human being longs to hear: that when the applause of the admiring crowd dies out and the theater stands dark and empty and the pretender in all of us removes the mask and stands there all alone, there is still a faithful God standing with us -- the God who knows our conduct grades and is well aware that we have primped around the classroom showing off for others; the God who nevertheless sees in secret; the God who looks behind the mask to find the child he knows and loves and claims. And then he calls us to come and repent, just as we are. And here we are. AMEN.