

The Message for Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 6:1-6

I. Hypocrite?... Have you ever been called a hypocrite? It is more than probable—and it is likely that you did not know it. Many times in the past, I have had disgruntled people refer to the people “up there at your church” as being hypocrites. And, while I do not remember hearing that while your pastor, I am sure that someone said it to one of your pastors in the past.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talked about hypocrites. He said that hypocrites especially like to be *seen* when they practice piety. That is an interesting word, “piety.” It literally means, “righteousness,” or “justice.” Jesus said that hypocrites like to be seen when they act righteously or get interested in justice.

Jesus defined what acts of charity and justice they especially like to be seen doing. The first is in giving alms. Alms originally meant, “having pity or compassion.” It later came to mean a gift given in charity or out of compassion. Jesus said that hypocrites like for people to see them doing something charitable—and that particularly includes giving money.

Second, Jesus also said that hypocrites like for people to see them when they pray. The hypocrites in Jesus’ day made a big deal by praying in public. I often jokingly advise, “Never call on a skinny person to have the blessing.” In reality, I never really related to super-long, and extremely flowery prayers.

When I was growing up, my home church had worship every Sunday night. At the close of worship, it was our tradition to have prayer time at the chancel rail. The younger people enjoyed sitting together in the balcony of our sanctuary. Of course, we would watch as others went to the chancel rail to kneel and pray. And, it was customary to have a little conversation as we watched.

Just about the time I was entering junior high school, my friend, Marie Gibson, related something that had she had overheard in a previous church. Every time that church had observed a Sunday night prayer time, a certain man would come down front to kneel and pray. Then, he would pray, loud enough for all to hear, “O Lord, fill me up.”

You know how small towns are. You can sneeze on Main Street, and someone across town will say “Gesundheit.” The man who prayed so loudly apparently left church and lived a very worldly life in the ensuing week. He would then return to church and offer the same prayer the next week. This went on, week after week.

One Sunday night, when he came down to pray, he said, “O Lord, fill me up.”

A little girl said, “Don’t do it, Lord. He’s got a leak!”

This was probably the kind of pray-er Jesus had in mind when he spoke of how the hypocrites pray.

II. Jesus said... Jesus said, “Beware how you practice your righteousness... unless you appear as a hypocrite.” (my paraphrase)

Do you remember what the word, “hypocrite,” means? Its original meaning was “to play a part on a stage.” In other words, “an actor.” Often, we assume a hypocrite simply means someone who says one thing and does something that contradicts it. If that were completely true, then I think that all of us are, in one way or another, hypocrites. I say that because I know all of us have stated something in seriousness or with good intention and then ended up doing the opposite. But, when Jesus used the word, “hypocrite,” he was referring to a person who only pretended to be whatever it was he or she wanted to be seen doing.

For example, when Jesus talked about doing righteous things, or acting in the interest of justice for some unfortunate person, he really meant to say “Don’t act like you are in charity when all you really intend is for someone to see you and be impressed.” I also think that Jesus meant to say, “Don’t say a prayer just to look religious when you really intend to impress the people around you instead of offering something to God.”

In that respect, hypocrisy is living a lie! It is saying, both to God and to everyone watching, that you are more interested in looking one way, when you really have very little religion going on in your heart. We have all, also, probably been guilty of playing the part from time to time. We do it every time we repeat or “say” the Lord’s Prayer instead of truly pray it.

III. No hypocrite, but... I do not know if anyone reads Jack London, anymore. When I was a young person, we studied his works, including *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*. Jack London once said, “I would rather be ashes than dust! I would rather that my spark should burn out in a brilliant blaze than it should be stifled by dry rot. I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet. The function of man is to live, not to exist. I shall not waste my days trying to prolong them. I shall use my time.”

He was no hypocrite. He truly lived his life like a meteor. Before he was 17 years old, he had worked many jobs. He eventually joined a march of unemployed workers and ended up spending a month in jail for vagrancy. London did not much care for jail, so when he got out, he got a high-school equivalency diploma and enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley. He immersed himself in books and became a radical socialist. A year later, in 1897, he dropped out of college to join the Alaska gold rush.

London never did strike it rich, but he did discover enough material to become a successful writer. He published his first book at age 24; and over the next sixteen years, he wrote a total of fifty books. He also became an alcoholic. At the age of 40, he drank himself to death.

Jack London was no hypocrite. He went up like a bottle rocket, and came down like a fluttering cascade of gray ash. He was true to his word when he said, “I would rather be ashes than dust!” (From the sermon, “An Invitation to Take,” 2/6/2008, found at www.homiletics.com)

He was no hypocrite. But, just staying true to your word is not necessarily the solution to hypocrisy. Jack London is a good example of that.

IV. xxxxx... Jesus was not opposed to practicing piety; nor was he opposed to practicing piety in public. Jesus simply was opposed to practicing righteousness, charity, and justice in such a way as to reap the greater benefit for one's self. And so, in light of this, let me make this challenge to each of us, me included.

It is customary for many Christians to give up something for Lent. It is a small, penitential way of cleansing our souls of past wrongs and preparing our hearts for the great joy of Easter. There is certainly nothing wrong with that. This year, however, I offer this challenge. If you decide to give something up, go ahead and give it up; just do not tell anyone what it is.

In my experience with many people during Lent, perhaps the most common thing to be given up is dessert. And, if one were to begin to pare that down, it might specifically be chocolate. If you have given up chocolate, or sugar, or country ham, or whatever, just say, "No thank you." See if you can do it without saying that you gave it up for Lent. It will be a challenge for me; but I am going to try it.

Mark Twain once said, "We're all like the moon, we have a dark side we don't want anyone to see." (www.sermonillustrations.com) I suspect that in actuality the dark side of the moon looks just like the side we easily see. It is just dark. I think that for the majority of us, our dark side is dark only in that no one else can see it.

In Lent, there will just be us, in our prayer closet, looking at our dark side. That means, no one else is going to hold us accountable. It is only going to be between each one of us and God. Only the two of us will know. But, at the end of these forty days, we will have done something that is completely in keeping with what Jesus respects; and we will be richer and deeper for it.

Will you do that with me?

The Rev. Michael D. O'Bannon, Pastor