

Sermon for 22 August 2010
Pentecost 13; Proper 16, Year C

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

This morning, I want us to begin by looking at a very strong word Jesus uses in the Gospel reading. When the leader of the synagogue shames Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, Jesus responds by exclaiming "*hypokrita*": "thou hypocrite". Despite every modern translation I've found, which turns this into a plural noun for some reason, Jesus uses a singular noun here, not berating the crowd or anyone else, but the leader of the synagogue specifically. The hypocrisy is not that of Judaism and the law, by any means, but of this individual.

Now "hypocrite" is an awfully strong word. I have heard many complain about the hypocrisy of some church people, and too often this is a reason for people leaving organized religion altogether. How many times have you heard somebody say "I can't

be in the church, because everybody's a hypocrite"? But let's take a look at what such critics of religion mean by hypocrisy and what Jesus means when he calls the synagogue leader a hypocrite. They are really quite different.

Generally, when we talk about hypocrisy we mean something like "not practicing what one preaches". At the risk of being unpopular, there are worse things in the world than this kind "hypocrisy". You see, this definition assumes that the so-called "hypocrite" does, indeed, have some principles, he just has a hard time living up to those principles, and he might lack charity for those who also have a hard time with it. By this definition, we are each of us a hypocrite from time to time. I preach love, and I believe I ought to be loving, but sometimes I slip into hatred. We believe in mercy, and we try to be merciful, but sometimes we take God's judgment as our own prerogative. This is a sad result of our sinful nature, but the alternative is

far worse, because the alternative is to have no principles whatsoever.

But Jesus means something quite different when he calls the synagogue leader a "hypocrite". I already mentioned that Jesus used the Greek word "hypokrita". This noun is derived from a verb "hypokrinomai" which literally means to play-act. It means *to pretend*. The original meaning was not especially pejorative. If you were to land a role playing, say, Falstaff in "The Merry Wives of Windsor" you'd be a hypocrite, and there wouldn't be anything wrong with that, unless, of course, you were a bad actor.

Probably the funniest bit of television I've ever seen was a few years ago when Sir Ian McKellan was a guest star on the BBC series *Extras*. The protagonist of the series, played by Ricky Gervais, was always trying to get a better role in some movie or television show, and each week a different famous actor would show up and give him advice. On

this particular episode McKellen went to great pains to explain the craft of acting as he understood it. "I see you don't understand", he told Gervais' character. "Take the *Lord of the Rings*. I played a wizard, *but*, I am not a wizard. I had to pretend. I'd be on the set, you understand, and I would still be Sir Ian. Sir Ian, Sir Ian, Sir Ian... Action... I am a wizard... Cut... Sir Ian, Sir Ian, Sir Ian." It was funny on a number of levels. Obviously there's more to being a great actor than that, but at its heart *pretending* is all it's about. You're a hypocrite, pretending to be something you aren't, and that's okay, because it's your job and everyone knows you're just pretending.

The problem comes when we play-act in real life. We can pretend to be something we're not if we're on the playground or on a stage. When our whole life is such a forgery, though, we cause great harm to ourselves and others.

The real problem with the leader of the synagogue was not that he had some principles and failed to stick by them. The problem was that he had no principles at all; he was just pretending.

The practical problem with such play-acting in real life is that we will be found out. We cannot know the role we are playing well enough to pull it off. This is what Jesus is getting at in the rest of his dialogue, though it may not be immediately obvious. He asks, "Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water it?" It's not that there are a bunch of people breaking the Sabbath by letting their livestock drink. Quite to the contrary, this would have been permitted by the Law, which actually demanded that the welfare of livestock be provided for on the Sabbath. But somebody who was just acting righteous might not know the Law well enough to know that, because he would not know the Law in his heart.

Jesus compares his own healing of the woman to this example. He wasn't breaking the Sabbath at all, but somebody who didn't know the Law well enough, who knew the Law only well enough to pretend to be righteous, would not have known it.

I heard on the radio yesterday about a shocking finding of some research undertaken by a professor of religion, whose name and school I sadly cannot remember. Anyway, he found that people who claim to be religious tend to have more racist sentiments than the general population. Of course, racism is just the sort of backward mindset that one would expect Christian practice to chip away at in the heart of a practitioner. After some further study, the researcher determined that those who actually came to church because they wanted to have some connection to God and to be changed by it were actually far *less* likely to be racists than the general population. The problem was that so many of his original sample had a different reason for

being religious. They wanted to fit in; they wanted to learn the "in-language"; they wanted to maintain the social cachet that was attached to being a Christian or a member of a particular church. In other words, they were play-acting. One hopes that if they keep going to church, even for the wrong reasons, something of the life-changing message of Christianity will eventually sink in. In all events, there are many today who indulge in religious hypocrisy without even thinking about it. I wonder sometimes if we pay enough attention to our own motivations to ferret it out in ourselves, or if Jesus will have to call us out, just like he did to that synagogue leader.

The good news in all this is that we have a reminder to be vigilant of our own motivations. We have an opportunity to figure out if we're really committed to the Gospel or not. And, what's more, we have another *chance* to commit ourselves to those values and principles which are designed to change

our lives for the better, to make us more gracious and loving. When we turn our judgment inward, not worrying so much about whether or not others are "following the rules" but rather concerning ourselves with whether or not the Good News is changing us from within, then we approach a turning point in our own Christian lives. We will be the better for it, and the Kingdom will benefit from our renewed sense of direction and resolve.

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Amen.