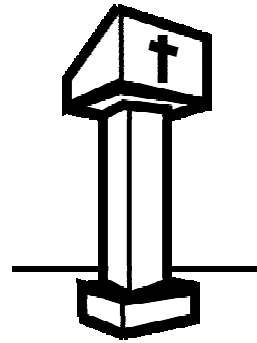


The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Synopsis of a Sermon Preached on October 30, 2011
By The Rev. Peter Champion



Last Sunday, after weeks of stories about the challenges to Jesus by the religious leaders of the Jews, we heard Jesus finally have enough. The Gospel last Sunday ended with Matthew's statement that nobody dared ask Jesus any more questions.

This week, Jesus really gets rolling! From a rhetorical perspective, Jesus reaches the peak when he tells the people, "Do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they teach." Whoa... Those are pretty harsh words—not words we'd want spoken about us.

Jesus is telling the leaders that their words and actions don't match. In other words, they're hypocrites. They don't do what they teach, and they don't teach what they do.

You need to understand that Jesus is using a standard rhetorical device in speaking of his opponents. Calling someone on the other side of an argument a hypocrite was—and is—pretty standard rhetoric. Even so, it stings. And Jesus goes on to point out that the leaders are using their hypocrisy to maintain their power ("they sit on Moses' seat"), to garner respect ("they like to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces"), and to stoke their egos ("they love to have the places of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues").

If you're like me, you love to catch others in their hypocrisy. It always feels like a victory when I'm able to point out when others don't practice what they preach. It is so satisfying!

The only problem is that, as the old saying goes, when you point a finger at someone you have three pointing back at you. We're hypocrites too, and while we enjoy pointing out others' hypocrisy, we don't enjoy having ours pointed out nearly as much.

We can even recognize that we use hypocrisy for many of the same reason Jesus pointed out. We say what we don't mean and mean what we don't say to hang onto or to gain power. We pretend to be better than we really are to gain the respect of others. And pointing out others' faults always stokes our egos by inviting us to believe we're better than they are.

Looked at from one perspective, Jesus' pointing out his opponents' hypocrisy looks and sounds an awful lot like judgment. But there is another way to see what happened in this story, as one of the commentators I read points out. Rather than judging his opponents, what if Jesus is inviting them to recognize their inability to live up to their own ideals encouraging them to seek help.

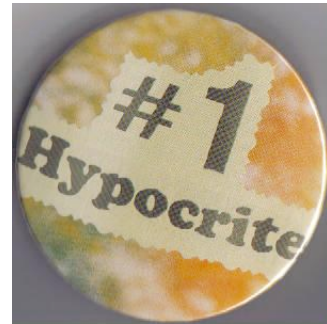
If we get caught in our own hypocrisy, it stings. But, the bottom line is that we're all hypocrites. You're not perfect? Welcome to the human race! The apostle Paul, in the

seventh chapter of Romans, says that imperfection is the basic human condition. Confessing that he does the things he doesn't want to, and that he can't do the things he does want to, Paul invites us to see the same in ourselves. We're broken. We can't fix ourselves. But there is one who can—God, working through Jesus Christ.

Looked at that way, I'd say Jesus spoke not in judgment, but rather out of love. He was saying, "I get it that you're not perfect. But it isn't until you get it that you can acknowledge your need for help."

I could begin our worship the way many 12 step groups do.

"Welcome to our regular Sunday morning meeting of Hypocrites Anonymous. My name is Peter, and I'm a hypocrite. Our program is based on 12 steps. The first step teaches us that we're powerless over our hypocrisy and that our lives have become unmanageable. The second step teaches us that a loving power greater than ourselves can help us."



Can you admit your need for help?

I'm not perfect. You're not perfect either. The only one who can get away with pointing out our imperfections is Jesus, who was the only human being who was perfect, not a hypocrite. Sure, it hurts to be caught in our own failings. But to be caught in love, rather than judgment, is such a relief. Help us, Jesus, to see that we need help. And then help us reach out and receive the loving help you offer us.