

WHAT A BUNCH OF HYPOCRITES

Matthew 23 and I Thessalonians 2

October 30, 2011

"What a bunch of hypocrites!" Been there. Heard that. Nothing original about that claim. The church has always been plagued by accusations of hypocrisy.

Well, I'm tired of hearing it. So I have a response to the charge that we are just a bunch of hypocrites. Of course there are hypocrites in the church, in politics, here, there, everywhere - hypocrites. The word basically means to wear a mask, to pretend to be someone else. What better time than Halloween to talk about hypocrites? What better time to talk about grown people wearing masks and pretending to be whatever gets votes during political season?

One kind of hypocrite is the one Jesus denounces in Matthew 23: superficial, self-righteous, obnoxious, over-bearing performance of the Pharisees. And the tribe of Pharisees lives on today and they are no longer just Jews. The Pharisees are hypocrites because they present themselves as the only true, pure, right, and holy ones. Today's Pharisees might not doubt that the rest of us are Christians, but they would be highly suspicious. They claim they love common people to gain a base of popular support for their social power but refuse to help the poor with their power. Jesus calls them hypocrites because they are not **pure** and they are not on the side of the **poor**.

They "tie up heavy loads and put them on the shoulders of the poor, but they are not willing to lift a finger to move them." "They shut the door of heaven in people's faces." In the King James Version of Matthew 23, there is a verse 14 (The NRSV omits this verse: They devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayer. Shouldn't that be cognitive dissonance? Surely that does real damage far more than my cousin Boudreaux playing the fiddle at the honky tonk on Saturday night and singing in the Baptist choir on Sunday morning. Some hypocrisy is basically harmless, but not when it involves religion, politics, and money.

Jesus unmasks their love of the place of honor at banquets, the best seats in the synagogue. When James and John, acting like Pharisees, came to Jesus asking for the two best seats in the kingdom, Jesus refused the request - teaching them the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

Pharisees are the worst sort of hypocrites. They know they are doing wrong and yet they keep on mouthing the language of righteousness, the language of the Bible. Jesus says, "You bunch of hypocrites, you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell* as yourselves."

Shouldn't the warning of Jesus make us stutter and swallow our judgment and criticism? As one theologian says, "Christian faith is hesitant. Hesitation expresses a mystery of being and dignity of every person." We need hesitation before we cross the frontier between thought and action. It is a mark of respect – for God and for the creatures with whom we share the earth."

I pray for holy reticence in the midst of all nastiness that now characterizes Christianity. Instead of pronouncing the behavior of others as ungodly, instead of feeling the urge to straighten out everyone who we think is crooked, instead of berating and criticizing, maybe we can catch our breath and hold our tongue. "7For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, 8but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.9With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.10From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, * this ought not to be so." 11 People hear Christians belittle one another and they don't want to belong to a company of people who mistreat one another over differences of opinion.

When the churches finally declare a truce and stop Bible battles, worship wars, what to do with women, gays, Muslims, and other minorities, and stop equating America with Christianity, the handful of Christians left will be able to stand on the ruins of our once-proud Republic and say, "I told you so." Or "You should have done it my way."

"Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions."

The other kind of hypocrisy is more of a charge thrown by people who are not part of the church. They refuse to come to church and they blame this on us. "I will never set foot in that church because they are a bunch of hypocrites."

"Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another."

If you refuse to go to church because there are so many hypocrites there, then you shouldn't go the ball game, the opera, the ballet, the Rotary Club, the restaurant, the golf course, or the carnival. In fact, you shouldn't go anywhere at all and make sure you never look in a mirror. Perhaps you suffer from atelophobia – the fear of imperfection. [Atychiphobia- Fear of failure](#). Automatonophobia- Fear of ventriloquist's dummies, animatronic creatures, wax statues - anything that falsely represents a sentient

being. Maybe people are afraid of theology: Theologicophobia, but there is so little theology in the churches today that no one would buy that argument.

Claiming that we are a bunch of hypocrites is like saying, "What a bunch of humans." We admit it. We are all part of the human condition. At a community gathering a minister prayed, 'Great one, source of all being, immerse us in the human condition. Amen.' Walter Brueggemann, sitting on the platform, muttered at the end of the prayer, 'Lord, this is Walt. I don't want any more immersion in the human condition than I've already got.'" We are up to our necks in the human condition. We've had enough of it to threaten the very existence of our planet. So don't go calling us a bunch of hypocrites as if you have made some kind of original theological discovery. Here we are in church, making the effort, giving our best. Part of being good is making the effort to be good and striving to live up to standards and principles that are, quite frankly, out of our reach. The other half of being good is having the grace to confess that we are trying to be good and we often fail. Instead of worrying about whether you are a hypocrite, just accept that you can't avoid this designation. One slip of the tongue, one outburst of temper, one wrong step, one embarrassing mistake, and there will be someone zapping you, "You hypocrite."

Relax! Hypocrisy is the risk we take when we commit ourselves to living a good life. As long as we do nothing, risk nothing, we are not likely to be called hypocrites. But as soon as you try to make a difference, as soon as you try to help others, prepare for the attacks.

Novelist Madeleine L'Engle: "If you look at the great protagonists in the Old and New Testaments, not one of them is qualified to do what God is asking that individual to do. (In a sense we're all unqualified. In a sense we're all hypocrites.) God goes to great pains to pick the unqualified. If you were starting a nation, would you pick a ninety-year-old woman and a man a hundred years old? That doesn't seem sensible, but that's what God did." If you were picking a commander to lead your people out of Egypt, would you pick a murderer? That doesn't sound right, but that's what God did. If you needed a courageous, powerful prophet to preach to the pagan city of Nineveh, would you pick a scaredy-cat preacher like Jonah? Well, that's what God did. If you needed a leader for your church, would you pick a fisherman whose loyalty ran out and cold, who stuck his foot in his mouth, who denied his Lord three times? We all know that Peter wouldn't have even made the first cut of interviewees for the job. Yet that's what God did. Would you call a self-righteous, obsessive-compulsive, intolerant

Pharisee, a murderer of Christians, to be the missionary to the world? Of course not, but that's what God did.

When someone accuses a fellow church member of hypocrisy, take up for one another. "I'm sorry but you have a false idea of hypocrisy. You just don't know him as well as I do. He's one of the finest men I have ever known. He is faithful; he loves this church and he's here trying all the time."

Let us teach others that Christianity is not about perfection but about faithfulness. Be careful who you call a hypocrite. God's faithful ones don't always look like much. There's Jacob who diddled his brother; and King David, the unfaithful ruler of Israel; Rahab, the whore of Jericho. There's Martin Luther banging his beer mug on the rail; Bonhoeffer writing not-very-good prison poetry and participating in a plot to assassinate Hitler; Martin Luther King, Jr. facing charges of being a communist and living in less than perfect ways.

They represent us. The prize of racing after Jesus is not for purity (The mistake of the Pharisees: superficial, artificial, external, looking-good purity, fake piety), but for faithfulness and fidelity. They all stayed the course, kept the faith, and endured. Though God's chosen servants are not always moral (sin is chronic in us all), they are called to be faithful to the end. So, listen up: It's too early to call a Christian a hypocrite. The race is a long way from being over. Those who are faithful unto death receive the crown of life.

Are we getting this? Is it sinking into our minds? Purity? No. Perfection. No. Faithfulness? Of course. So go ahead and call us a bunch of hypocrites. We plead guilty and we ask for God's mercy. Here we are Lord in your presence, practicing our faith, singing your praises, praying our hearts out that we can have the courage to be the people we hope to God you think we are. Here we are Lord and we are trying with all our hearts and minds to live lives worthy of the gospel, worthy of you. And, Lord, we don't want to be spiteful, but we would just like to ask our accusers a simple question: "Here we are in church. What are you doing?"