

Wesley United Methodist Church

February 10, 2016

"Hypocrites."

Matthew 6:1-6

Everybody hates a hypocrite. Isn't that right? We may be able to tolerate diverse groups of people in our society, but one group that does not get compassion is the group made up of people who publicly stand for one thing and do something else.

Even Jesus disliked hypocrites. We're often reminded that Jesus never called anyone a sinner, and that's true. He looked past the sin to the person caught in a misdeed. Still, even Jesus had no sympathy for hypocrites.

In tonight's Scripture from Matthew, Jesus says, "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Later in this same chapter he adds, "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

This isn't the only time Jesus mentions hypocrites, but it will be enough for this evening. It is clear that Jesus didn't like hypocrites.

When I was a child and televisions became the fad, our pastor was preaching an impassioned sermon on the evils of television. "It steals away precious time that could be better spent on other things," he said, advising the congregation to do what he and his family had done. "We put our TV away in the closet." "That's right," his wife mumbled, "and it gets awfully crowded in there."

The word hypocrisy means simply "putting on a mask." The word comes from the Greek language and was used by actors who entertained crowds at outdoor theaters. It describes a person who puts on a face to make a good impression. Of course, none of us would ever do that. Well, most of the time. We might try to impress someone like a client, a member of the country club, a neighbor or even a family member. Or anyone for whom it is important for us to project a certain image. Just playing the game. That's true. Image is everything. That's why business people pay big bucks to advertisers. Does reality match the image? Most of the time it does not. But hey, they're just playing the game. We will tolerate hypocrisy in nearly every other field than religion.

And that's all right. Jesus doesn't want us to make a show of our faith. Jesus wants us to be authentic in our commitment to him. That's what Ash Wednesday is all about. That's what Lent is all about. It's about dropping the pretense. It's about living the Christ life to the best of our ability and not worrying about what the rest of the world thinks. Even though we are in this treasured fellowship, in a sense it's just us and God. We are humbling ourselves in the presence of complete holiness and praying with the Psalmist, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." Psalm 139:23-24

Our focus this night is not upon ourselves, but on the cross of Christ, he who "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death--even death on a cross." There was nothing phony about the Master. There was no desire to impress others. He was real to the end, and that's what he wants from us. Be real, for Christ's sake.