

YEAR B, PROPER 17

Song of Solomon 2:8-13, Psalm 45:1-2,6-9, James 1:17-27, Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

WALK THE TALK

I want to begin, by taking just a moment, and a bit of liberty, to clarify one part of today's gospel reading. In today's gospel, as well as in other places, "The Pharisees" were chastised as hypocrites. In one place the text labels these hypocrites as "the Pharisees and the scribes". In another, it refers to "all Jews". Hypocrite, of course, is not synonymous with Pharisees, scribes or Jews. It doesn't really matter who is doing the hypocrite-ing. It is simplistic and wrong to make that connection. The religion of "The Pharisees" wasn't more distant, less loving or more merciful than our own religion<sup>1</sup>. Today's exhibit is sure enough about the hypocrisy of these particular Pharisees. But this lesson is for us – and about our own, common hypocrisy.

I find religious hypocrisy to be particularly rich. And that is because we take two enormous liberties. The first is that we presume to speak for God, and somehow assume to have both the divine knowledge, and the divine authority, to lay out the rules for proper Godly behavior. The second element requires that we of course are concerned not with our own failings and mistakes, but with that of others. Hypocrisy, whether by Pharisees, Episcopalians or Mormons is the problem that Jesus was concerned with in today's gospel.

So let's start with this. What is it that God does want from us? One of my

favorite scriptures is about that very question. We read this from Micah 6:8: “He has told you O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” Today’s beautiful reading from James says it in much the same way: ‘Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.’”

But wait a minute – didn’t God himself give us the law? These very rules so faithfully and precisely kept by the Pharisees? God did indeed give these laws to the Hebrews, and would expect them to be followed. And despite what may be the response of some Christians, the coming of Jesus didn’t erase these laws. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is explicit about this; “do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.” So how is it that following God’s law can be condemned by God?

This little conundrum about the law – the rules - isn’t really that hard to solve. What God – what Jesus - wants from us, is uniform and consistent throughout the scriptures. And it is not complicated. We find the Great Commandment in both the Old and the New Testaments. St. Mark’s version comes as the Sadducees and the scribes were debating about the priority of the many commandments. When asked which commandment was number one, Jesus responds with this well known verse; “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord

our God, the Lord is one, you shall love the Lord our God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.’”

I am not much of a Jewish scholar. But the Old Testament laws aren’t necessarily just for Jews. For Christians, such as ourselves, the Old Testament is every bit our scripture too, although we often find it convenient to keep it on the lower shelf. But it seems to me that the law – the rules - are to be guides, aids and prescriptions to help us get to the meat of what God wants; and that is complete love for God, and complete love for our neighbors – every hour of every day in every circumstance. I suppose another metaphor might be something like this. Suppose the goal was to build a house. Now to do that, we have to procure the land, clear and prepare the land, make plans, obtain supplies, and then do the work. All of these steps are necessary to reach the goal. But they are the means to the end. I think the problem is in when we lose sight of the end – the real purpose – because we get preoccupied with the means – the steps that are just intended to lead us in the right way. For the house metaphor, it would be like never getting close to building the house as we spent all our time working on the perfect architectural plans. We can, and from time to time do, get sidetracked, or preoccupied, in our work to draw closer to God. It happens to us all, even church leaders, even clergy. We can get so busy with the details of church, the planning, the meetings, the never ending tasks, that we can lose sight of why we

do any and all of it.

But the hypocrisy comes in when we start to think that others should be just as concerned about the same things that we are. And more, that our priorities are not only right, they are how God wants things to be. It is those religious finger pointers that Jesus addresses today. Jesus tells the crowd, that the ritual observances are not the mark of righteousness. Indeed, this ritual holiness is just a way to justify ourselves, not God. People can get all worked up about ritual practices, the external things. God is more concerned about the inside – what is in our hearts. No amount of ritual practice matters, if our hearts and our souls have become darkened by evil and sin.

The letter of James tells wonderfully about the joy of a true Godly life. It is poetically descriptive, and remarkably free of ritual. As God's beloved, we are to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slower still to anger. Our generous acts of giving passes on the gifts that God has given us. James warns us about being hypocritical to ourselves. Being merely hearers of God's word to us, and not doers. We can sometimes see the face of God when we look into the mirror. We can see that we were meant to reflect God in our lives. But when we turn away, we remember only ourselves, and forget that God dwells within us. We act on our own behalf and in our own interests, forgetting our God in whom our lives can have real and profound meaning. And when we do, we deceive our hearts, shroud our souls, and our religion becomes worthless.

It seems to me there is one more point. When our notion of religion – what

God wants for us - is determined by rules, our primary motivation is fear. We are afraid we might break the rules, or do them wrong. But if what flows out of us is based in love, we are incredibly free, able to transform ourselves and others by the power of God's love for us. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> dylan's lectionary blog, SarahLaughed.net Proper 17, Year B