

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
22nd Sunday after Pentecost
September 2, 2018

The Hands and the Heart

Psalm 15; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

You know the old reply to someone who says,

“I don’t go to church
because Christians are just a bunch of hypocrites”...

“Well, come on in, my friend—
there’s always room for one more!”

It’s true. We really are a community of hypocrites.
And frankly, there is a sense in which I am okay with that.

Here’s why:

The existence of hypocrisy points to the continued existence of a standard,
a rule of life,
a vision of Christian and human perfection toward which we strive.

The only way to get rid of hypocrisy in human life is to get rid of the standard.

And as another old saying goes,
“If you aim for nothing, you’ll hit it every time.”
So three cheers for hypocrisy!

That said, our standard in the Christian community is, of course,
that we should not be hypocrites.

So today’s sermon examines how not to be a hypocrite.

Or — said another way — today’s sermon examines

**how to keep our hearts and lives in line with our convictions;
how to keep our inward spiritual life congruent
with the outward forms of our religion.**

This exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees about washing hands
has nothing to do with good hygiene
nothing to do with spreading germs.

Today we know that washing hands with soap and water
or copious amounts of hand sanitizer
is important for prevention the spread of infection.

Whenever I’m walking to and from a pastoral visit in a hospital room
I hit about every third hand sanitizer station along the way,
going and coming.

We can’t be too careful about not spreading infection.

The issue between Jesus and the Pharisees is not about this.

It is about ritual purity —

it is about honoring God's call to holiness in all of life.

In Leviticus, God commands

You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

Israel's religion was full of practices aimed at honoring this command.

So while there is no biblical law about washing one's hands before eating,

there is a ritual requirement that priests wash their hands and feet before eating the holy meat from the sacrifices.

And there is a command in Exodus that all Israel

shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.

The Pharisees argued

that this meant **all Israelites should be as holy as priests,**

and therefore all Jews should wash their hands, ritually, before eating.

When the Pharisees complain of Jesus' disciples eating with "defiled" hands,

the Greek word literally means, "common" or "ordinary" hands —

that is, hands that have not been ritually purified.

Jesus responds by turning the criticism back on the Pharisees.

He quotes the prophet **Isaiah**,

who charges Israel with paying more attention to ritual than to compassion.

Through the mouth of Isaiah, the Lord asks:

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice?...

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house? (Isa. 58:6-7)

Jesus pushes back against the Pharisees' criticism,

saying that what matters is **not ritual purity, but compassionate living.**

And compassionate living grows out of a pure heart.

Jesus seeks to go behind the rule the Pharisees are espousing

to ask about the reason behind the rule,

and the heart that keeps the rule.

The holiness of physical life matters

only if it shapes the spiritual condition of the person.

In fact, this could be said of all biblical law, from the Ten Commandments on:

it is intended to address the condition of our hearts.

This is why Jesus says to the scribe,

when asked which commandment is the first of all:

"...you shall love the Lord your God..."

The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

There is no other commandment greater than these."

What renders us clean or unclean is not some external practice

but what is going on inside of our hearts.

**Evil begins in the human heart and grows out into every sort of vice.
Holiness, then, also begins in the heart and grows out in love.**

Because they seem to have missed this connection between ritual and the heart
Jesus calls the Pharisees *hypocrites*.

Now the charge of hypocrisy, in one sense, is hard to take;
but also, in another sense, it should be a no-brainer.

In fact, anyone who is offended at being called a hypocrite
is even more of a hypocrite for being offended.

We are all hypocrites, in one way or another.

I know I am!

I wrote that prayer of confession we just prayed,
and I have never written a prayer of confession that doesn't apply to me!

"Hypocrisy [is] the **disconnect** between the moral values and standards that we espouse
and those that we actually practice in our behavior."

The Greek word for hypocrisy refers to "acting out a theatrical role" and "pretending."

"...Hypocrisy is a **negation of authentic life**:

it is **life acted out to fool others**,

a role that we take on and pretend to be,

that is not really us.

It is a **denial of our authentic self**

in favor of the fabricated persona that we wish to be.

Religious hypocrisy, in particular,

is a most destructive kind

in that it **uses sacred teachings about Truth itself**

to elevate self-deception...

Hypocrisy is as common to our experience as love and hate.

What Jesus is pointing to here

is the quintessential human struggle

to discover and maintain the integrity of the self."¹

So how is it that a good person becomes a hypocrite?

Often it is by **paying more attention to the laws we are keeping
than to the laws we are breaking!**

And by **paying more attention to the laws other people are breaking
than to the laws we are breaking.**

Or perhaps by **rigidly adhering to laws**
even when the outcome is the opposite of the human well-being
those laws were meant to protect.

The Franciscan friar Richard Rohr has said that it's
"people who know how to creatively break the rules
[who] also know why the rules were there in the first place."

And in fact, "the Dalai Lama said much the same thing:
'Learn and obey the rules very well
so you will know how to break them properly.'"²

This seems Jesus' approach in this case.
Jesus is breaking certain rules that have gotten in the way of deeper faithfulness.
Jesus is breaking certain rules to goad scribe, Pharisee, and disciples alike
into a deeper level of reflection on the condition of their hearts.

It is interesting that Jesus, in inviting us to this reflection on the heart,
offers a list of **vices** rather than **virtues**...

...perhaps because a list of virtues might lead us to self-congratulation,
whereas, the list of vices makes us look at things we might rather avoid.
and Jesus does have a knack for making us look at things we might rather avoid.

So let me offer my own reflection about hypocrisy and the heart.
A confession, I suppose.

Over the past year,
I have been leading the Session through a study of Baptism in the Reformed Tradition
because, in case you haven't noticed,
we've been doing a lot of baptisms here at Fourth,
which means the Session has been approving a lot of baptism.

As a Christian pastor, I have a concern—
and it's a legitimate concern from a biblical point of view.
My concern is about parents who bring their children for baptism,
and make promises to raise their children in the Christian faith,
but then very rarely bring their children back
to participate in the life of this or any Christian congregation
where they might actually keep that promise and learn the Christian faith.

In this concern, I am a Pharisee—in the positive sense of the word.
Namely, **I am committed to a vision of Christian faith**
which holds that the Christian character is developed by life together
in Christian community.

Like the Pharisees I believe that if we do not adhere to certain practices of togetherness
then the Christian community is very likely going to
dissipate, dissolve, and disappear
into the culture that surrounds it.

We have been studying baptism as a Session because,
in the Presbyterian Church, it is the Session — the Ruling Elders —
who are responsible for maintaining the integrity of our worship
including the sacraments.

As teaching elder I teach and advise and guide,
but the buck stops with the Session.

The Session approves the baptisms.

We, the Session, have the authority.

We are the scribes and Pharisees, in the positive sense.

The biblical scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus,

"Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders,
but eat with defiled hands?"

Today, we Presbyterian scribes and Pharisees ask,

"Why do you make promises in baptism that you do not keep?"

Do you see the connection?

Can you appreciate the difficult position of the scribes and Pharisees?

They are acting with concern for the integrity of the religious community.

And yet, they've missed the point.

My confession is this:

There is a subtle line between this commendable care for the integrity of our worship,
and an attitude of spiritual pride by which we harshly judge our neighbors.

Our legitimate concern for maintaining Christian community
and for developing Christian character in our children
who will be adults the day after tomorrow
is a respectable concern, even praiseworthy.

But in the subtlety of our sinful nature—

in the vexing irony of religious and spiritual life—

that commendable concern

can become the very thing that separates us and others from God.

When the outward practice of religion becomes a wedge driven between people,
or becomes a ruler by which we not only measure faithfulness,
but crack the knuckles of others we deem to have fallen short,
then we fall into the kind of religion
that Jesus is challenging.

At the end of the day,

the religion Jesus cares about

is the love of God and the love of neighbor.

If our best religious intentions somehow distract us from that purpose,
we have lost our way.

Rules that do not serve love...
...are not the commandment of God,
...but merely human traditions.

May God grant us the wisdom to know our own hearts
...as we seek to follow the One...
...who has shown us
...a truly holy
...and truly human ...life.

¹ Loye Bradley Ashton, *Feasting on the Word* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 22.

² Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011) xxviii