

## What Is Hypocrisy?

(Sermon by Ed Cerny at Beaverkill Community Church, 8/18/2013)

In his human form, Jesus not only was a carpenter, but a preacher. He went from place to place, preached to many groups who had diverse beliefs, customs and dialects. To communicate well with His fellow men, often he would preach telling parables, stories which show an otherwise hard to understand truth. And so, following His example, as Christians must strive to do . . . .

There once was a childless Irish farmer and his beloved wife who labored long and hard and saved what money they could. The wife died, and the farmer went, distraught, to his priest, confessing that he no longer had interest in life, and was thinking of doing himself in. "Now, Farmer, don't even think of it," said the priest, "It is a sinful thought of pride. The days of the life of your body are numbered in heaven, and it is sin to try to release your soul before the date assigned by God." "Well, Father," said the farmer, "what am I to do, then?" "It is hard to know," said the priest, "but perhaps if you got a wee little doggie as a companion . . . ." That is what the farmer did, and it worked: every day the wee little doggie would follow him to his fields, return with him to home in the evening, and sleep at the foot of his bed. The farmer was happy again, and this state of affairs continued for many years until the little dog died. Alone again, the farmer returned to the priest. "Oh, Father, my wee little doggie has died." "I heard," said the priest, "and a sad day it is for you, indeed." "Well Father, I would like my wee little doggie to be buried in the churchyard, next to my dear departed wife, and a memorial mass said." "Oh my, Farmer," said the priest, "now you know that animals don't have souls, and we don't do that sort of thing here." "Well, Father," said the farmer, "what am I to do, then?" "Well, Farmer, perhaps if you go down the road to the Anglican Church . . . they have some rather curious beliefs, and perhaps the rector there can help you with your wish." "Oh," said the farmer, "and, Father, do you think the rector there would accept my 5,000 pound contribution for the mass?" "Now, just a minute, Farmer, now just a minute," sputtered the priest, "now you did NOT tell me that your wee little doggie was a Catholic"!

I imagine most people would agree that the priest in the story seems a good man, gave good advice in accordance with the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, and only erred when he pursued the temptation of money, albeit for the presumed benefit of the Church, instead of adhering to the purity of his stated beliefs. In thus acting, he also engaged in hypocrisy, an act almost universally scorned, if not forbidden, and warned against by the Christ. I add that the farmer in the story also seems a good man, but quite clearly led the priest into temptation, and thus also believed in one thing but hypocritically acted contrarily. Paradoxically, this is the source of the humor in the story.

Today's Gospel reading is confined to the last part of Chapter 12 of Luke. The entirety of Chapter 12 is a long sermon by Jesus to a crowd of His disciples. The bookends of the body of the sermon concern hypocrisy. Jesus' first words to his disciples are: "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is

hypocrisy." In the body of the sermon Jesus continues with parables, instructions, and advice on avoiding greed and temptation, leading a virtuous life, and achieving salvation of the soul. At the end of the sermon Jesus again calls out against "Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky, how is it that you do not know how to interpret this present time?" The accusation this time, however, was aimed not at the "yeast of the Pharisees," that is, not at the swollen agitations and sophistries of the Pharisees, but at his own disciples, his own followers, those who already were persuaded to believe in Him and in His message. Why are both the Pharisees and the disciples guilty of this posited hypocrisy?

First of all, I am informed that Christ's words were likely spoken in Aramaic, and may or may not have been perfectly transcribed from oral tradition many years later, and may or may not have been accurately translated into what likely was Greek, taken into Latin, then eventually into English. I looked at Luke 12 in every version from the King James to the New International, and all of them use the word "hypocrisy." So, in trying to understand Christ's teaching we have to deal with this word whether we like it or not.

That said, I think most well educated people would know this word, it is an old word, and I think most would say that it is properly employed when we describe a person who does not practice what he preaches. The modern dictionary definition bears this meaning out but is a little more expansive: a hypocrite includes not only a person who acts in contradiction to his stated beliefs but also a person who puts on a false appearance of virtue or religion.

The first words of Jesus' sermon throw the dart of hypocrisy at the Pharisees. Now in the Gospels, it seems everyone except the Pharisees loves to hate the Pharisees. The Pharisees, as is recorded in many places, were members of a Jewish sect notorious for strict observance of rites and ceremonies of the written law and for insistence on the validity of their own traditions concerning the law. Jesus confronts the members of this sect on numerous occasions, including when He heals the sick and lame on the Sabbath day. The Pharisees claimed this violated God's commandment that on the seventh day thou shalt do no work. We heard about one of these confrontations last Sunday, will hear about another next Sunday, God willing. Indeed, the Gospels are replete with references to the wrong headedness of the Pharisees. Probably because of the Gospels, we have a word, "Pharisaical," that comes into modern English meaning conduct of a person marked by hypocritical, censorious, self-righteousness. So, this was not a friendly dart that Jesus hurled.

But, while it is quite clear that Jesus condemns the Pharisees for hypocrisy, why is it that insistence on strict adherence to the law should be called hypocritical? One can argue handily that strict adherence to the laws of God is good thing, not to be condemned. Maybe the point is that the Pharisees were wrong on the law but, if so, that still would not justify a charge of hypocrisy. Only if they believed they were right on the law but did not abide by it themselves, or if they knew they were wrong on the law and proclaimed it anyway, would they properly be charged with hypocrisy.

Now turning to the last words of Jesus' sermon, Here, He throws the dart of hypocrisy at his own disciples, but here we have a little more context to inform us of His meaning.

Jesus early in the sermon already had told his disciples not to fear death of the body, that there are rough waters ahead, that he is going to send them out to proclaim the good news, the great promise, of salvation. People are not going to believe them, they are not going to like what they hear, and the disciples are going to have to suffer and grin and bear it. But, He says not to worry: "When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say." Let's face it, this was pretty cold comfort.

Then at the end of the sermon, He picks up this vein again, saying,

"I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! <sup>50</sup> But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

This message is pretty fearful, and based on what I have seen of public speaking, at this point Jesus probably was beginning to lose the crowd: people are shifting their feet, looking at each other, mumbling, checking the exit points, thinking, "Boy, what are we getting into with this guy, maybe we should give this a little more thought - in private. Maybe they have started to leave, and the trickle may have started to turn into a torrent.

You do not have to be divine to understand this reaction, and Jesus certainly does and shifts into an elaborate metaphor about the weather and then hurls the hypocrite dart. Here again is what he says:

"When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does.<sup>55</sup> And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. <sup>56</sup> Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?"

Maybe this was His parting shot at a crowd fast disappearing. After all, in his divine form, he gave them free will. Therefore, his only recourse is persuasion, not force . . . They must be allowed to doubt, to leave, and, in any event, tomorrow is another day.

Nonetheless, how can a crowd of people be accused of hypocrisy in this situation? Did members of the crowd put on a false appearance of virtue or religion? No. Did members of the crowd not practice something that they preached? No, they were listeners at a sermon preached by someone else. They

might be accused of stupidity, fickleness, or maybe even disloyalty, but these are not hypocrisy.

Why, then, does Jesus use this word, and the concept which it bears?

Here, I think, we have to review and keep in mind some of the basic principles of Christian belief:

First, that we were created by God who created the universe and rules over it and us.

Second, that the universe was created as an act of God's free will for His own glory, but that God does not seek to be glorified for His own sake, but for the sake of mankind that they may know Him. Thus our duty is to know, love, and serve our God.

Third, that God knows each of us as a unique soul with a unique name.

Fourth, that he gave us free will and the ability to distinguish between what is right and wrong, which separates us from all other living creatures.

Fifth, that he gave us the law by which we are to conduct ourselves.

Finally, and as I tried to convey in a sermon given from this site almost a year ago, despite our imperfections, and despite the shortness of our lives, these principles are knowable by us, and knowable not just from revelation, not just from what our ancestors learned and passed on to us, but also from our very nature and our personal observations, including what today we call scientific inquiry.

These principles may explain what Jesus truly meant when he said "You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?" By the way, according to Luke His very next words were "Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right?"

So, I believe that what Jesus is saying here, and this is true for both the Pharisees who would not permit Him to heal suffering humanity on the Sabbath day, and also it is true for his own disciples who will doubt and fear his words and walk away, that Jesus knows that they know in their hearts that they are wrong, and yet they act and profess to the contrary.

And therefore, He rightly hurls at them the correct words: "You hypocrites!"

Let us hope, and let us pray, that in our day we may do better.

Amen.