

Sally Cerny's Church Talk, 8/25/13—Hypocrisy and Christ's Healing Touch

Last week some of you were here to listen to my husband, Ed, tackle one of the most difficult passages of Luke. In it, an angry Christ called the multitude and even his own *disciples, hypocrites*. In today's Gospel, *Luke 13, Verses 10-17* (which follows soon after the one Ed discussed), Christ again cries out, "*You hypocrites!*" Jesus lashes out against hypocrites 17 times in the New Testament, so you know this was an important theme for him. Clearly, falsely religious men, the self-important hypocrites stood between him and his message.

Today's story is a familiar one. Jesus was teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath, and a woman in the congregation was severely bent over. Luke writes that she had been "crippled by a spirit for 18 years." You might picture her with severe osteoporosis and a back so bent over that she had to crane up her neck just to look at your face. She said nothing and did not ask for help, but when Jesus saw her, he called her over to Him and straightaway healed her. Luke simply says, "He put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God."

It was one of Jesus' miraculous healings and Good News . . . but maybe not for the synagogue leader who defined himself as in control of his flock. Who was this outsider with such frightening powers stirring up his congregation? Instead of praising Jesus, the priest attacked Him contemptuously because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath Day, the day God has commanded us to rest. But is this *really* why the rabbi was angry with Jesus, or was it because his congregation was delighted with Jesus' works and healings? Was he lashing out because he was jealous and afraid of Jesus' powers?

Note that in today's lesson, Jesus did *not* turn the other cheek. Luke continues, "The Lord answered him, '*You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water?*'" In modern terms, will not each of you today care for your family and animals and even flowers, as needed for life and health? Should you *not* help your neighbor on the Sabbath? Jesus affirms God's commandment to keep the Sabbath Day holy and put aside work, but he sees God's word with a broader understanding of life and health. "*Should not this woman, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath Day from what bound her.*" In this context, isn't to love thy neighbor God's paramount commandment?

The final lines of this week's passage have Hollywood potential: "*When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.*"

On the other hand, Hollywood and role-playing are just what Jesus is fighting here. Last week Ed noted that our word *hypocrisy* comes almost directly from Greek drama and the ancient Greek word for play-acting, pretending to be someone you are not. The *hypocrite* is unholy and flawed, yet he projects himself as religious, virtuous, and holy—*holier than thou*, and here self-fashioned as holier than Jesus. When the synagogue leader is projecting that

false role, how can he be honest with himself, and how can he know, love, and serve God? He can't. *He can't*—his hypocrisy *blocks him* from Christ's teachings, from a right relation with God and his fellow Jews, and even from his ability to know himself.

During this talk, I will use the term *hypocrite* perhaps more broadly than Jesus did, to encompass all such self-serving deception . . . pretending to be what you are not and to believe what you do not, to curry favor and "look good" when we are not. It's still common enough that we know it when we see it—at least in other people.

One question I've never been able to answer well is, "*Does the hypocrite know he is a hypocrite . . . or does he come to believe his own stories and rationalizations?*" He or she may know unconsciously that he is lying but be able to fool his own conscious mind. Lying and deception, like telling the truth, tends to be *habit-forming*, easier to do again each time you do it. This knowledge runs through Christ's teachings, and it is also one of the tenets of psychologists later. Carl Jung, for example, called the self-righteous tales we weave part of our *persona*, our public self, and its danger is that it masks or hides our balancing *shadow self*, that unconscious part of our personality that we tend to hide even from our own eyes. Deception and hypocrisy block self-knowledge. Jung called this process *the general hypocrisy of man*. There's that word again! And it isn't just ancient wisdom. If I were as musical as our tenor Ed, I would whistle a few bars from Billy Joel's song, "The Stranger" for you. "We all have a face that we hide from one another."

Today for the first time we can see and record the brain's functioning with such brain-imaging techniques as the *fMRI*, and PET and SPECT scans. We now know that in fact we do have unconscious mental processing, and, in fact, the *majority* of our processing is unconscious. Fooling our own conscious thinking may be all too simple.

Returning to Jesus and today's Gospel again, *hypocrisy* is worse than straightforward deception and falsehood, Hypocrisy separates us, blocks us both from knowing ourselves and from being in an honest relationship with ourselves, each other, and God.

If, on the other hand, we can cast aside self-righteous hypocrisy wherever we find it (including in ourselves), we can move toward more healthful relationships. And this brings me to the second aspect of today's lessons that I'd like to explore with you: *touch and its role in a direct relationship with God*.

When he healed the bent-over woman on the Sabbath, Jesus, as he did so often, simply *put his hands on her*. Similarly, in this morning's Old Testament lesson, where the Lord is calling Jeremiah to be his prophet, Jeremiah does some role playing too. "*Oh no, not me, Lord, (he says) I do not know how to speak; I am too young.*" (Don't look at me!!) God quiets him and says that he will be with him and rescue him. Then, Jeremiah reports, "*the Lord reached out and touched my mouth, and said to me I have put my words into your mouth.*" Through God's own touch, Jeremiah has become God's prophet.

Christ's healing ministry is a ministry not just of the Word but also importantly of touch. *Touch*—and more broadly, feeling and understanding our *direct connection* to God and each

other—is important in these stories, throughout the Bible, and, as Linda showed us two weeks ago, throughout life. It is more of a lifelong need than most of us are willing to admit, even to ourselves. We know that being held and cuddled is essential to healthy development in babies and children. A loving touch reassures us; an injured toddler runs to her mom to kiss her and make it better. Touch *by itself* can be healing; the touch from someone you trust and love is a deep blessing.

Conversely, without touch, we are more likely to do evil. It is easier, when ordered, to bomb and destroy *many* people at a *distance* than to hurt one person you are connected to and especially anyone you are physically touching. Think unmanned drones . . . we can become the Evil Empire at a distance. Stanley Milgram discovered through his social psychology experiments that people have a frighteningly strong tendency to obey, yet *not* if it means hurting someone they are touching and not if they are made to feel *personally responsible* for their actions. You can put together for yourself how using chemical weapons in Syria fits into this scenario.

In today's world, it frightens me that people are increasingly advised *not* to touch, not to shake hands or hug others. After all, we might get their *germs!!* The truth is that to develop a strong immune system and antibodies, you *need* some exposure to other people's germs. Also, years of teaching Rutgers students have convinced me that, at all ages, we not only like but *truly need* physical contact, a good hug, a warm handshake, a look in the eye, trust, commitment, and one-on-one understanding. Our minds click on, our face and brain light up when we make that direct human connection . . . and hundreds of *Facebook* friends won't do the trick. Is it possible that today's almost meteoric rise in the level of autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is somehow correlated to a decrease in face-to-face one-on-one touch and human interaction? Our general immune systems are also strengthened by personal relationships—and that even includes our pets. Old people live significantly longer and happier lives when they have pets . . . a finding that is doubly interesting if you consider that those pets also carry allergens and pathogens that can challenge our immune systems. We just plain *need* connection and *need* touch to feel whole, at peace, and part of our world.

Jesus knew and used the power of touch, the laying on of hands, throughout His ministry, and He also knew that *hypocrisy* blocks health and healing—on a personal as well as a cultural and religious level. You might remember Stuart's sharing this wisdom with his take on Adam and Eve earlier this summer. Those of you who were here will remember Eve's, "Not me, Lord, the snake made me do it!" And Adam's "The woman *YOU* gave to me, Lord." My brother calls this tempting hypocrisy *your fault insurance*, and it is based on a denial of personal responsibility . . . "*it has to be your fault; it can't be mine!*" In the Gospel according to Stuart, Adam and Eve deflected blame for the original sin, worming their way out of responsibility for eating the apple. In doing so, they exiled themselves not only from the Garden of Eden but also from God's comforting touch. For the first time, they hid their shame behind clothing, excuses, hypocrisy. Original sin grew from eating the apple, and it kept growing.

What about today? What can we do to resist or fight Jung's *common hypocrisy in man* in ourselves? You'll laugh at this, but one strategy I continue to try, after years of hearing students' endless rationalizations ("The traffic made me late, my computer broke, my Mom is sick, the dog ate my homework") is to make a serious effort *not to lie myself, even on small things*. Now when I catch myself starting to lie or make excuses, I stop and make myself analyze why I want to resort to deception. This process has been helpful and healing—and even *fun* to realize that in fact we *don't* need to lie, and our relationships grow stronger the more that people trust us. They even become more trustworthy in return. And guess what . . . people really don't care *why* we are late! Realizing our own weaknesses also helps us to be open to Christ's message and healing care and to be aware of our connection with others. When we pass the peace today and each Sunday, we are back in touch one-on-one . . . and I like to think that this personal touch helps us to keep the Sabbath Day holy.