

Holy Hypocrisy!

Micah 3: 5-12

Matthew 23: 1-12

Hypocrisy never seems in short supply. Everyone has some; some more than others. I think everyone's favorite hypocrite was the regular *Saturday Night Live* segment in the 80s called "Church Chat" starring the Church Lady character who graces our bulletin cover. Church Lady was played with great effect by Dana Carvey. She is the kind of Christian that no one wants to be, but she is also spot-on for the kind of Christians we've all known at some point in our lives.

Church Lady was known for preaching in ghastly unctuous tones about the love of Jesus and the forgiveness of Jesus before launching into ugly condemnation of any hint of sinfulness inspired by Satan. She was always passive-aggressive, keeping the same sickly sweet tone whether talking about Jesus or about Satan. Her signature line in her commentary, as she exposed the failings of someone, was: "Well, isn't that special?" The segment would often end with Church Lady doing a terrible, jerky dance.

Hypocrisy usually leaves us shaking our heads, like how could someone pretend to stand so strongly on principles and when life intrudes, that person casts away those very principles. There was the recent scandal involving a staunchly pro-life, pro-family congressman who, upon learning that his mistress had gotten pregnant, urged her to get an abortion. Hypocrisy, by the way, is totally non-partisan.

Religious people are most particularly gifted in hypocrisy. Religious folks love those principles, and the deeper the love of those principles, the more likely hypocrisy emerges as the hard core of passionate principle meets the squirmy jellyfish of real life.

Sometimes it isn't easy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a prominent German theologian who could have evaded the Nazis by taking teaching positions offered to him in the US. He opted instead to remain in Germany and engage the struggle against Nazism. His deep Christian faithfulness led him to embrace Christian ideals. Last week, I read a quote from Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr's seminal work was a book called "Moral Man and Immoral Society." Put (too) simply, individuals can attain moral principles in their lives, but for a society to change and adopt such moral principles is an entirely different matter. When talking in terms of societal changes, Niebuhr makes it clear that a forceful confrontation of social power must be (and will be) met with a forceful moral power. When Bonhoeffer read Niebuhr's thesis, Bonhoeffer criticized Niebuhr's denial of pacifism in the face of such power. Bonhoeffer's idealism was speaking, believing that peaceful, non-violent strategies *could* be effective in societal change.

A few years later, Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany would become an agent in Nazi naval intelligence, the *Abwehr*. The *Abwehr* however was riddled with anti-Nazi agents, starting at the top with Admiral Canaris who sought Hitler's demise. Bonhoeffer's idealism about pacifism got washed away by the reality of Nazi brutality and the ghastly costs of the vicious war. Bonhoeffer had a deliberate role in the bomb plot to kill Hitler. Bonhoeffer would be executed by the Nazis only days before Allied forces liberated that concentration camp in Germany.

Is that hypocrisy, to sacrifice a cherished ideal for the sake of real world conditions? That's a tough one.

An article popped up recently about the pro-life activist who murdered an abortion doctor in Pensacola 25 years ago. The 25 years were up in his 25-to-life sentence. The clemency board denied his request for release, unsurprisingly since he has never expressed any remorse for his murderous action. He remains convinced today that what he did was necessary. Is it pro-life to murder someone who you believe is killing babies by the hundreds? It may seem absurdly, grossly hypocritical. Yet how far different is the principle involved in this man's violent act – sacrificing principle to save lives – from the same decision by Bonhoeffer – also sacrificing principle to save lives. I don't find this easy.

Neibuhr's contention that individual morality is a different proposition from societal morality seems to be borne out in those examples. It's helpful to remember that when looking at scripture and looking at the situations we face in today's world.

When the prophet Micah launched his tirade against the sinfulness of God's people, we need to remember that it isn't individual behaviors *per se* that are being criticized. It is societal practices that get condemned.

Hypocrisy seems a major theme. Micah starts his denunciation by focusing on the prophets. He doesn't mean prophets like him, but the royal and religious prophets – the establishment prophets – who make claims that are routinely two-faced and convenient.

Micah's charge against the puppet prophets must be understood in context. Micah declares: *Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry 'Peace' when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths.* The prophet isn't literally talking about food or hunger. Micah charges that puppet prophecies shape royal taxation depending on who pays their taxes – the wealthy who “feed” them – or those who scrounge to pay or don't pay – the poor on whom “war” is declared. In other words, those who can't or won't pay need to be brutalized in order to take from them what the royal treasury demands. Micah's prophecy condemns a whole system that is unjust and oppressive for the weakest members of the society.

Even puppet prophets are speaking in God's name when they make declarations. Micah is incensed because such prophets abuse God's name, pretending God would authorize such corrupt and exploitative practices. The judgment against the prophets is a time of darkness when they will be cut off from the God who they pretend to serve. Their hypocrisy will cost them their well-being, just as their failure has led to the suffering of the littlest ones of God's greatest concern.

Micah, on the other hand, is feeling his oats as he declares: *But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin.*

Unsparingly, Micah dumps on the wholly corrupt society allowed by the leadership: *Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! Its rulers give judgement for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money.* Filled with the Spirit of the Lord, Micah does some holy truth-telling.

Then Micah pulls back the curtain on their holy hypocrisy. *Yet they lean upon the Lord and say, 'Surely the Lord is with us! No harm shall come upon us.'* Therefore **because** of you, *Zion shall be ploughed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the temple mount overgrown.* The players here manage a system claiming sacred authority while acting in self-interest, with disinterest in God's will. That will lead to the downfall of the whole society – Jerusalem a heap of rubble, and the temple mount an overgrown weed patch.

Listening to Micah's biting denunciation, it should be no surprise that Jesus is having similar issues with the religious leadership of his day about 7 centuries later. We've been hearing about Jesus' confrontations with these folks for several Sundays.

Again, Jesus is not simply condemning the Pharisees and the teachers of the Torah-Law as individuals or even as religious groups. Jesus' tirade is about the hypocrisy of supporting and encouraging a corrupt and unjust system of social exploitation while pretending to be devout servants of God's will.

Jesus warms up by chastising the supposed servants of the Lord for their acceptance of privilege for themselves. Yes, Jesus admits, they do have authority and ought to be respected for that. However, they also show their true colors when *they tie up heavy loads and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.* The religious leaders play a hypocritical game as they pretend to be pious and devout in service of the lord, but in reality, they serve a system that is unjust and oppressive.

Here, Jesus is only getting started. He will carry on for the entirety of chapter 23, but I didn't want to go over all 39 verses with you. He sounds a bit like Micah in one place. Remember Micah talked about food and hunger to describe puppet prophets serving a system hostile to the poor and struggling, Jesus uses a different image. Jesus says: *Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by the oath.'* *You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred?*

Jesus goes on to say: *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!* The religious leaders practice the Torah-Law faithfully in one regard, in a matter that they can manage quite easily. But when the truly important interests of the Kingdom are at stake – justice and mercy and faith – the religious leaders don't seem to care at all. To do so would rock the boat, and they have no stomach to do so.

Today's church is not much different. Who champions the cause of the poor? Flip through the big names in Christian circles and there is a deafening silence of indifference to the poor, outcast, and struggling, while there is a roar over personal morality and phantom wealth to be discovered and delivered.

The one exception is Pope Francis, God bless him, And scorn is heaped on him for departing from enforcing tradition and meddling in social concerns. Meddle on, Pope Francis! You give me hope.

The systems railed against by the prophets and by Jesus have new forms today that entrap and suffocate the struggling people of God's greatest concern. Holy hypocrisy thrives 'as gnats are strained and camels are swallowed,' as justice and mercy and faith in the ways of the Lord and his Kingdom are neglected and cast aside

The church over the ages has never been very good at the Lord's work in ministry. It's insincerity toward Jesus' gospel has never gone unnoticed. In earlier eras when the power of church over culture and as influencer of politics and people was more effective, many would subscribe to the tradition as having value. Those days have been coming to an end.

Young people are turned off by the church. To them, the church seems irrelevant. The church is clueless about their student loan debt, but wonders why they're marrying later. The church is indifferent to their low wages and having to work multiple jobs, often with scant benefits, but the church worries whether they have a personal relationship with Jesus. The church seems unaware of the high levels of infant mortality, the abysmal level of health care for women, and the shockingly high number of women who die from childbirth in the USA, but the church is obsessed with abortion as if nothing else matters.

Holy hypocrisy remains as Christian as a wooden cross. As we consider our faith lives, let's be alert to what is **not** being said, to the parts of the gospel that have been edited out due to their inappropriate content. May we face the Kingdom challenges in our faithful witness, learning and teaching and proclaiming the Lord's message of justice, peace, mercy, and new life for all of God's people.