**Embracing Hypocrisy—Mark 7: 24-30**

*(September 5, 2021-15th Sunday after Pentecost)*

There is a story of a person that is pulled over by the police and asked for their license and registration. "What's wrong, officer," the driver asks. The officer says, "well I saw you waving your fist as you swerved around the lady driving in the left lane, and I observed your flushed and angry face as you shouted at the driver who cut you off." "Is that a crime, officer?" "No, but when I saw the ‘Jesus loves you and so do I’ bumper sticker on the car, I figured it had to be stolen." Ouch!

Have you ever been confronted with an accusation of religious hypocrisy? It’s one that stings. It’s something Jesus faces in our faith story today. In the story just before this one, Jesus has a confrontation with members of a Jewish sect called the Pharisees, who are upset that Jesus’ disciples don’t wash their hands before eating. The Pharisees are a group who among other things devote themselves to bringing some of the practices of temple worship into daily life. Handwashing is one of those practices, a practice rooted in the Hebrew scripture concept of purity. Purity was a complex concept that had practical health applications in terms of food safety and hygiene and theological applications in terms of how one prepared to worship and approach the Holy. Thus, whether one practices some of these purity rituals becomes a way of defining who is a Jew and who is a gentile. Jesus blasts the Pharisees for their pre-occupation with externals at the expense of what those externals represent. He admonishes them, It’s not what you see on the outside that God cares about, how clean your hands are, what you eat, who you associate with, its what’s in the heart that matters: Is your heart pure is the question that is important to Jesus.

After this encounter Jesus is tired and he wants to get away, he heads to a place where he thinks he will lie low for a while, a place far enough that no one will recognize him. Tyre, modern day southern Lebanon. A non-Jewish gentile area, whose inhabitants are by definition impure, and more than cursory interactions should be avoided. Which is just fine with Jesus. But the story tells us he couldn’t escape notice.

Then, not only a gentile, but a gentile woman approaches him. Not only is she impure, but she is also breaking the prohibition against women speaking to men to which they are not related. She kneels at his feet and begs that he heal her daughter. Have you ever been asked to do one more thing, take on one more project when you’re already at the end of your rope? When you’re physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually exhausted? How do you react? Do you react thoughtfully, with compassion? No of course not, you react instinctively. I wonder if this is what Jesus does, I wonder if it his exhaustion speaking when he responds to the request with the words; “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Ouch!

In my exhaustion, I know I revert to old patterns of behaviour, I become self-willed. I shut God out of the picture and sometimes I betray my deepest values. It seems to me it’s what Jesus does; he reverts to old patterns, to the old prejudices on which he has been raised. Some scholars have tried to sugar-coat this story saying Jesus just said this to test the woman’s resolve and faith. I don’t buy it, Jesus was fully human, which means he had blind spots, he too had his moments of hypocrisy.

But there is much grace in this story. When you give it some thought there is an interesting flipside to the accusation of religious hypocrisy. The only way to avoid such an accusation is to never claim to have any Christian beliefs or values that guide your living. If you never commit to anything you will never be accused of being a hypocrite. Hypocrisy is the condition of being faithful and being human. It’s an inevitable fact of the life of faith. It can also lead us deeper into faith if we embrace the learning that comes with facing hypocrisy honestly. It’s what Jesus does.

This gentile woman is possessed by love, her heart burns with compassion and zeal for the healing of her child. “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She doesn’t care about artificial boundaries between pure and im-pure, between male and female, she cares only about her daughter, her only concerns are life and love. Funny thing isn’t, it’s what Jesus just preached a chapter back. She speaks Jesus’ own truth, God’s truth back to him. When Jesus hears this truth, it brings him back to himself, it reminds him of who he is and who he claims to be.

Faced with his own hypocrisy he responds in 2 ways, with humility and compassion. He could have ignored or even berated the woman and it would have been met with approval by others as the socially acceptable thing to do. But he doesn’t care that God’s truth came to him through a gentile woman; he acknowledges that she was right. The important thing is that God’s truth was spoken: the power of life and love over and against ethnic, gender and religious divisions.

His second response is compassion. He heals the girl; he shows compassion toward the mother and her daughter. Here is something else—Jesus is compassionate toward himself. He doesn’t obsess about his mistake; he doesn’t waste precious energy beating himself up. He learns and he moves on, all the wiser for his encounter with this unexpected teacher. Jesus doesn’t expect himself to be perfect.

There’s a lesson here for us as well. The worst accusation a Christian can face is not hypocrisy; it’s idolatry (worshipping false gods). We worship a false god when we expect ourselves to be perfect. When we do so we think we should be in the God role. To be Christian is no to strive to be perfect, it is to strive to be faithful. It’s not about checking a bunch of boxes that gets us into an elite club but, rather opening every moment of our living up to a relationship of trust with the God who loves and accepts us for who we are at any point in time. To be fully human is to be limited—to be fully human and faithful is to open ourselves up to hypocrisy as part of the journey of learning and growth.

Here’s something else that our story tells us—our flaws, our hypocrisies are the gateway to God. When we allow God to work through our hypocrisy with humility and compassion relationships are transformed, divisions cease; people who were once apart are brought together. Healing happens. It’s the good news of today’s scripture. Good news that holds the possibility of resurrection for people of faith in our individual relationships and as our hypocrisies are exposed in our relations with those over whom we’ve used and use Christianity to judge, subjugate and disadvantage; Indigenous peoples, Black peoples, lgbtq2s peoples, disabled peoples, addicted peoples and more. When our hypocrisy is put in the hands of God it becomes a vehicle for healing. God takes it and uses it to bring people together in love, understanding, respect and solidarity. It’s what Jesus meant when he said, “The kingdom of God is here.” A slice of heaven on earth; what was divided is now one, what was broken is now whole. Thanks be to God, who draws us into relationship, not through perfection and judgment but through our flaws and our faith. Thanks be for this grace. Amen.

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