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Proper 17B
Peace, Seattle
September 2, 2012
Mark 7:1-8, 14-23

BEYOND HYPOCRISY

An atheist is hiking through the woods.
WHAT MAJESTIC TREES! WHAT POWERFUL RIVERS! WHAT BEAUTIFUL ANIMALS!
he says to himself.

As he walks along the river, suddenly he hears a rustling in the bushes.
He looks and there stands a 7-foot grizzly on its hind legs, growling & ready to charge.

The man turns and runs as fast as he can, but over his shoulder he sees the bear gaining on him…
He doubles his effort, but looking back, finds the bear even closer.

Falling to the ground he rolls over to discover the bear right above him, its massive paw ready to strike.

In that instant the atheist cries out, "GOD HELP ME!"

Time stops. The bear freezes. The forest falls silent.

And as a bright light shines down upon the man, a Voice comes out of the sky.
"YOU DENY MY EXISTENCE FOR ALL THESE YEARS,
TEACH OTHERS I DON'T EXIST, AND CALL WHAT I HAVE CREATED A COSMIC ACCIDENT.
DO YOU *REALLY* EXPECT ME TO HELP YOU OUT OF THIS PREDICAMENT?
AM I TO COUNT YOU AS A BELIEVER, THEN?"

The atheist looks directly into the light,
YOU'VE GOT A POINT. I SUPPOSE IT WOULD BE HYPOCRITICAL OF ME TO SUDDENLY ASK YOU TO TREAT ME AS A BELIEVER NOW.
BUT…COULD YOU MAKE THE BEAR A CHRISTIAN?"

VERY WELL, says the Voice.

The light goes out. The sounds of the forest resume.
And the bear sits back, brings both paws together, bows its head and says:

LORD BLESS THIS FOOD, WHICH I AM ABOUT TO RECEIVE FROM THY BOUNTY THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD. AMEN.

"LORD," the psalmist asks, "WHO MAY ABIDE UPON YOUR HOLY HILL?"

And then comes the answer:
Those who lead a blameless life and do what is right, who speak the truth from their heart; who do not slander with the tongue, and do no evil to their friends; and do not cast discredit upon a neighbor…those who do these things shall never be overthrown."[1]

[1] Psalm 15, edited.

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A blameless life(!) Well…how's it going so far? With the apostle Paul I confess:

> I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate… I can will what is right, but I cannot accomplish it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.[2]

If hope lies in my living a blameless life, in my own ability to toe the line, to keep covenant, to stay on the straight and narrow and avoid slipping into the ditch on either side of the road, then I'm afraid I am just one more hope-less hypocrite.

Hypocrite. It's a word that is used most often to describe not non-believers (as in the joke I told) but those who claim to be Christian but whose lives fall short of the mark.

Let's unpack the word a bit.

Hypocrite has its origins in the Greek theater where a hypocrite was one who wore a mask and played a part on the stage, imitating the speech, mannerisms, and conduct of the character portrayed.

A hypocrite, then, is someone who, in donning a mask, has exchanged his/her authentic self for a fabricated, a pretend self; one whose life is acted out to fool others.

And hypocrisy is about the disconnect between the moral values we espouse when the mask is on, and those that we actually practice.

"Hypocrisy," someone once said, "is as common to our experience as love and hate."[3]

Preacher and teacher William Willimon once began a sermon this way:

> If your marriage is happy,
> if you have no addictions,
> if your children are obedient and respectful,
> if you can say all of the words of the creed by heart,
> and have no major problems believing the Bible [and putting it all into practice]
> then you can leave now. This service is not for you.[4]

Too often the Christian faith is presented to the world as if it was intended for the winners, for those who are a success at life and belief. For non-hypocrites. But of course, when you read the scriptures, you discover that nothing could be further from the truth.

The presenting issue in the gospel today is TABLE MANNERS; the RITES and HABITS and TRADITIONS that helped the Jewish people maintain their identity as people of God.

After his disciples are criticized for not washing their hands before dinner (and by the way, this tradition has nothing to do with hygiene!) After they are criticized on spiritual etiquette, Jesus retorts,

> YOU ALL ARE MISSING THE POINT!
> THERE IS NOTHING OUTSIDE A PERSON THAT BY GOING IN CAN DEFILE,
> BUT THE THINGS THAT COME OUT ARE WHAT DEFILE, and then he rolls out the short list.

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[2] Romans 7:15f.
[3] Ibid.
[4] William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vo. 29:4, 2001, p. 18

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The trouble, he says, is the human heart. The same heart that beats in me and you and everyone; regardless of gender or race; regardless of how much money you have; or your sexual orientation or political affiliation. **It's the evil from within that defiles, says Jesus. Not the window dressing.**

WE HAVE MET THE ENEMY AND HE IS US.

But beneath this indictment there is an invitation that comes in the form of a question. I put the question like this: What kind of community do we want to be?

In her book JESUS FREAK, author Sara Miles, who came to Christianity through a mid-life conversion centered around eating a chunk of bread, describes the journey her new faith propelled her to take, feeding hundreds of hungry poor each week in the sanctuary of St. Gregory's Church, in a run-down San Francisco neighborhood.

Listen as she describes how the pantry transformed lives:

> Giving (she writes) was the basis for authority at the pantry: people became leaders because they worked hard and took care of others...Glen was one of them. A skinny, poor white guy with long gray hair and a torn sleeveless T-shirt, he rushed through the pantry picking up tasks, sweaty with emotion. "I love this pace, Sara," he'd say, with great intensity. "You know, this place has saved my life. I would of jumped out a window if I didn't have it."
>
> Glen went to a court-mandated anger management class, because he'd been in so many fights… [yet] every week he walked for forty minutes to get to the pantry, then ran around unloading and cleaning, fixing the dishwasher on his knees, taking apart broken pipes, piling up boxes in the backyard. He draped his arm around me.
>
> "I come here and I get to give everybody something," he said. "I don't have to like them. It doesn't matter if they're [idiots]; it doesn't matter what they might say to me; I'm never angry here. I don't even want to fight. It's weird; I'm like a different person. I look forward to Fridays all week. It's the place I can just be with everyone, no matter who they are."[5]

But lest we imagine her work was noble, Sara speaks honestly of the other side as well.

> And then there were the Fridays I didn't look forward to at all. I'd show up already impatient, dreading conversations with one more crazy person. I'd snap at Paul and be rude to Michael; I'd cook morosely, not even bothering to make the lunch nice. I'd feel hateful sometimes, watching people trying to scam each other; I felt disappointed when, for the third week in a row, Big Jim would show up drunk and obnoxious and we'd have to send him home. I got sick of pantry visitors peeing the bushes, throwing their trash on the church steps, breaking the branches off the flowering trees in our front yard. The worst was when volunteers would corner me to complain about each other or whisper accusations: this one's stealing food, that one passes extra to her friends, he takes too much bread. It's not fair, it's not fair, it's not fair.
>
> It *wasn't* fair. I tried to remember what Jesus preached constantly: mercy. It sounded like an abstract theological principle, but I clung to it to keep me afloat in what was otherwise an inexplicable sea of human sin. ***Mercy.*** It was all that could help me give up my self-pity and judgment. All that could help us turn the food panty into a beloved community, despite our selfishness and backbiting.[6]

[5] Sara Miles, *Jesus Freak.* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2010) p. 34-35.
[6] Ibid, pp. 35-36.

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On one occasion, Sara was peppered with questions about fairness from a group of school children who had volunteered at the pantry the week before:

"How do you know the people who come to get food really need it?" they wondered.
And "How come some people have cars and cell phones but they still get free food?"
"Do people take advantage of you? What do you do to keep people from cheating?"

I talked with the kids about the idea of 'taking advantage,' she writes, explaining [to them] that it was impossible to be taken advantage of as long as you were giving something away without conditions.

"If it's a trade, then it's fair or unfair," I said. "But if I'm going to give it to you anyway, no matter what you do, then you can't take advantage of me…
In my church we say that judgment belongs to God, not to humans.
So that makes things a lot easier for us. We don't have to decide who deserves food."[7]

What kind of community are we called to be?

A community with room for hypocrites of all stripes.
A community where Jesus keeps showing up, as he promised, in the word and in the bread.
A community where it's OK to take off the mask and be who we are.

A community where we can let go of the responsibility of judging who deserves what, and instead simply revel in the mercy of a Savior who loves us just as we are, and who lives to transform our hearts, one beat at a time.

Amen.

[7] Ibid, pp. 37-38.