

The Second Sunday in Lent – 2021

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Romans 5:1-11

Mark 8:27-38

Most folks are turned off by people who talk one way and act another. Most people are turned off by someone who adopts false appearances in order to impress others, in order to manipulate others or to advance their own cause. It's a drag but some people are fake. How many of y'all want a fake best friend, or a fake congregational president, or a fake chairman of the board of elders?

I suspect that most of us believe that we can spot fakery. Hypocrisy – that's fakery's formal name. I suspect that many of you are indeed *very capable* of spotting hypocrisy. Do you know why that is? It's because you have been exposed to it over and over. If you see something often enough you begin to recognize it rather quickly.

Examples are easy to conjure up. The brave talking, chest thumping fellow who turns cowardly in the face of any real danger. The publicly dainty, well-mannered damsel who is a perfect beast when she thinks no one is watching. All too often people present themselves one way when in actuality they are something quite different – they themselves know it in their heart and sooner or later it becomes obvious to others. When the unexpected happens, when the world goes sideways unpredictably, that's when true colors run bright.

Hypocrisy; we are keen to pick up on it in others, but this character flaw is something we are reticent to see in ourselves. When, do you suppose, was the last time someone observed fakery in you? The hypocrisy radar operates at a higher detection frequency in matters of religion. "Practice what you preach" has become axiomatic in every sector of society due to our intolerance of religious fakery – we have had quite enough of that, thank-you very much.

Practice what you preach. It is a biblical phrase. It is used as a rebuke to hypocrisy; a rebuke of religious hypocrisy. Practice what you preach. The phrase is used exactly once in all of Holy Scripture. Jesus said it. Jesus said it as He described the religious rulers in Jerusalem, the Pharisees and scribes, and He warned His disciples to avoid their ways. "Do not do what they do for they do not practice what they preach" (Matthew 23:3 NIV).

Jesus was a remarkable teacher. Everybody knew it. He spoke with an otherworldly authority. That is where it stopped for many people. It appears as though very few expected Him to actually practice what He preached. Jesus fully intended to make fast the connection between His teaching and His life in the mind of His disciples. More and more, for us, the Lord's contemporary disciples, more and more we are called upon to make fast the connection between His life and His teaching, between our lives and His teaching, between His life and our lives (that is what growth in the faith is). In actuality, those things cannot be separated; it is pure fakery for a Christian not to practice what He preached.

"Who do people say that I am" (Mark 8:27). The nonsensical answers were abundant. Clearly, the people knew that Jesus was a religious figure of some import but the connection between His

teaching, His person, and what He had come to do was not made. Jesus zeros in on His disciples. “But who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:29). “Peter answered him, ‘You are the Christ’” (Mark 8:29). Brilliant! Jesus was/is more than a teacher! The Lord Christ was going to capitalize on that moment, unveiling for His disciples what it meant *to be* the Christ, what His intentions were to fulfill His messianic calling, what the genuine nature of His teaching was *at its core*.

“And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly” (Mark 8:31-32a). He intended to practice what He preached. Jesus’ teaching makes no sense apart from His sacrifice, His bloody cross. Being a Christian makes no sense apart from denying yourself, picking up your cross and following Him. Apart from that reality, it is just dress-up, play acting, religious fakery. Christ came to do. Christ came to act, and His teaching was anchored in His life. There was no way that He was NOT going to practice what He preached.

In contrast, Peter wanted Jesus to be the headmaster in the school of hypocrisy. Peter loved the Lord’s teaching, loved the miracles, loved how he felt in Christ presence, but Peter hated the idea of loss, hated the idea of dying, hated the idea of the cross. Let’s keep religion in the abstract. Let’s keep it at arm’s length. Let’s sing sweet songs and smile nicely at one another and promote the necessity of the church but let’s not actually entertain the idea that Christianity calls us to die with Christ, to die to the world and its vanity, to die to the wants of our self-interested, highly self-protective sinful nature. Is there something more important to you than denying yourself, picking up your cross and following Christ? Is there something more important to you than eating His body and drinking His blood, as He bids you do? All the talk of sacrifice and love made Peter’s spirit soar but when it came to Jesus and His cross, Peter clenched his teeth in rebellion. “Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him” (Mark 8:32).

But here’s the thing, as much as we point out how wrong it is for Peter to rebuke Christ, as much as we make note of his shallow point of view, his empty religious ideas, all true – Peter believed Jesus. Peter knew that there was no fakery in Christ and His words. Peter knew that Jesus meant *precisely* what He said. You know it as well. You know that if you are thoroughly connected to Christ that you will be changed. You will begin to love in the way that He loved. You know that if you are thoroughly connected to Christ that you will abhor the vanity of this world and strive for treasure in heaven – forgiving your enemies, adopting the Lord’s own humility, His disinterest in the things of this world. He said: “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit” (John 15:5). St. Paul is equally clear: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Ah, but you hold onto the old life. You are apprehensive of giving Him more and more of you. You want to maintain control. What are you holding onto? What keeps you from giving Him *all* that is you? Don’t you know that trying to save your life in this world is a formula for losing it? *The Jerk* is a Steve Martin movie. A genuine imbecile, with his pants down around his ankles, he walks out of his palatial home and says: “I don’t need anything, except this remote, except

this paddle game, except this ashtray, this chair, this magazine. I don't anything... except this lamp, and these matches." He holds onto all this junk while saying that he doesn't need anything. It's funny in the movie, but it's you and me – not so funny. What do we need more than Christ, more than His blood, more than His life? He is our meat and drink. He is our home, our hope and our heaven. He is life for those dead in trespasses and sin. Crucified, He loves us to the full. Sin is vanquished and Divine Love is poured out upon the earth. For you. He is risen. He brings new life and calls us to follow Him. I leave it to you, the saints of Christ the King: Shall we follow Him? Shall we savor His body and blood, shall we luxuriate in His grace, shall we hearken to His voice? No fakery. Shall we practice what we preach?