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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 14, July 9, 2023
Matthew 6:1-18

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is the second installment of our summertime Sermon on the Mount series. My text for today is our Gospel lesson, the first eighteen verses of Matthew chapter 6, and my theme is this. “Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them.”

Most of us here are New Yorkers, whether by birth or transplant. I don’t know how it is in other parts of the country, but Jesus’s warning might sound a little strange to New York ears. There are lots of ways that people vie for status in New York City, but cultivating a reputation for piety is not near the top of the list.

It was in Jesus’s day. Being known as very religious and very upright gave you social clout. That is one reason the Pharisees, those who observed Jewish law with above average strictness, had such high social standing in their communities.

There’s another way we can translate what is given as piety in today’s text. Righteousness. “Beware of practicing your *righteousness* before others in order to be seen by them.” That hits a little closer to home, doesn’t it? It might not be as fashionable to be religious as it was in times past, but it’s always fashionable to appear righteous.

The truth is, humankind hasn’t changed. The desire to be seen in a good light is universal and timeless. Next time you’re on the road, pay attention to the bumper stickers and count how many of them seem calculated to show the world what an enlightened person the driver is. Or, take a look around at some of the popular yard signs and window placards, not the ones endorsing this or that political candidate but the ones that feature sweeping moral statements. You know the ones I’m talking about. “In this house, we believe all the right things,” is what they boil down to. Or if you’re on social media, take note of how many people change their profile picture to signal their agreement with the latest good cause. The fact of the matter is, we are all tempted to make ourselves look good. Maybe we shouldn’t be so hard on the Pharisees.

What Jesus is warning against in today's text is a familiar temptation and one that we, all of us, probably succumb to more than we would ever want to admit, the temptation to make a show of our good deeds and our noble opinions.

Now, just a chapter ago, Jesus said, "Let your light shine before men, so that they can see your good works." (Matthew 5:16) Jesus told His followers to be salt and light in this world, and the only way that makes any sense is if our good works are public and visible. So far in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has urged us to refrain from lust, anger, and retaliation. He has told us not to swear oaths and not to divorce our spouses. He commanded us to love our enemies, help the poor, and turn the other cheek. All of these actions will, of necessity, be visible to others. Part of being salt and light is being people of righteousness who seek always to do the right thing for the sake of our fellow man. This cannot and should not be hidden.

But Jesus has this warning for us, and it is important. Righteous works alone are not enough. You can be doing everything right and still be doing it wrong, if you are doing it for the wrong reasons.

This section of the Sermon on the Mount often appears under the heading, "Warnings against hypocrisy." Jesus says three times in this section, "Do not be like the hypocrites."

This makes sense. Nobody likes a hypocrite. There are a lot of sins and foibles we tolerate in our fellow human beings, but hypocrites are generally a despised breed. There is usually a collective chuckle of exultant glee when a hypocrite is found out. Celebrity love affairs are a dime a dozen, but when a prominent member of the Moral Majority gets caught in a sex scandal, it's headline news. When vocal climate activists who lecture the rest of us about our carbon footprint get caught flying around the world in their private jet, they will find themselves the butt of late-night comedians' mockery. And when politicians advocate defunding the police to win votes and then hire private security companies to protect their own private property, well, let's just say that the journalists who scooped that story will have no mercy.

Anybody who loudly preaches one thing but practices another will soon find himself or herself the object of a special kind of scorn. He or she will be called "sanctimonious, self-righteous, holier-than-thou." In the eyes of many, it is worse to be a hypocrite than a run-of-the-mill scoundrel, so long as the scoundrel makes no bones about his villainy and doesn't try to pretend he's something he's not.

This kind of hypocrisy is bad, yes, and it is also not hard to demonstrate. All it takes is a good investigative reporter to do some digging and uncover the hypocrite's disguise. In fact, the original word hypocrite, the Greek word in the original biblical text, is the word once used for actor. In the theaters of antiquity, actors wore masks and so presented a false face to the world while hiding their true face. When you unmask a hypocrite, you reveal him for the two-faced liar that he is.

Jesus certainly condemns such bald-faced hypocrisy, and He faced it many times during His ministry. But I do not think that is the whole story in this section. Jesus's warnings are not just aimed at people who don't practice what they preach (or proclaim on a bumper sticker), and He is concerned about something more insidious than empty virtue signaling. There is a warning here for every one of us, so before we pat ourselves on the back and say, phew, at least I don't have secrets that would make for a juicy Page 6 column, at least I'm not a two-faced Pharisee, we better go back and look at Jesus's words again.

What Jesus is concerned here with is motive. Jesus wants our whole heart, every layer of it down to the subconscious impulses we are not even aware of.

And Jesus is the world's greatest psychologist. Freud's got nothing on Him. Jesus can tell us things about why we do what we do when we ourselves are blissfully ignorant of our own motivations. And one thing Jesus understands is how much we crave approval from other people and from ourselves. We long to be seen as acceptable, worthy, admirable, even superior. Like Greek actors, we put on masks and play for audiences without even realizing it. Sometimes we even put on a mask before looking in the mirror.

What does Jesus want from us then? He wants us to take off the mask. He wants us to stop putting on a show of piety to impress other people or even to boost our own self-image. And if we are doing these things unwittingly, He wants to help us stop and get rightly oriented again.

Jesus wants us to be so focused on God that we are indifferent to the opinions of men, so focused on the Lord and pleasing Him that even our left hand does not know what our right hand is doing.

Let's take a closer look at what this means.

The three concrete acts of righteousness that Jesus specifies here are charity, prayer, and fasting. These are the three pillars of Jewish morality, and taken

broadly, they encompass every act of worship and goodness that the Law requires of each of us.

Let's start with charity, or almsgiving. Giving alms was an important feature of Jewish morality because there were no social services back then, but almsgiving is not limited to this context. Charity (which comes from the Latin word for love) is an all-encompassing virtue. It's not just about the money we donate; it is about every act of kindness, every concrete way in which we show love and care for our fellows.

And let's be honest. It's easy to see why Jesus would warn us against sounding our own trumpet when we do a good deed. The expectation of receiving a reward for doing something generous is pretty much built into our culture, maybe into our human nature. Donate a large sum of money to an organization and get a building named after you, or at least a plaque with your name on it. Give to a good cause or do something heroic and be recognized for your sacrifice. Do something nice for somebody and get a thank you. And that's probably the way things *should* be. *We should* recognize and thank people and express our appreciation to them, but when we are the ones giving - and Jesus doesn't give us the option to *not* give or performs acts of charity - we need to be careful. Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Do not let your acts of love have ulterior motives. They will cease to be acts of love and become acts of self-indulgence instead. We might be able to fool other people, we might even be able to fool ourselves, but God won't be fooled. And God's opinion is the one that counts.

The next warning Jesus gives concerns prayer. Don't pray in order to be seen. That may seem like an unnecessary admonition to many of us who can't imagine using prayer to impress other people. The way the world is now, I think more people might be tempted to hide the fact that they pray than to make a big show of it. But I think there is something else in what Jesus is saying here, besides the obvious fact that prayer should never be an act that we perform.

Prayer is communication with God. It doesn't matter if it's corporate prayer or individual prayer, and both, by the way, are indispensable to Christian life. When you are having an earnest conversation with a loved one, your focus should be on that person. Your words are addressed to that person. If you are sincere and trying to communicate your thoughts honestly, you are not playing to an audience or worrying about how eloquent or smart or good you sound. You are speaking from the heart. You are not really focused on your self at all.

Well, how much more so when we are talking to God? Jesus says, when you pray, drop your pretensions and pour out your heart. Don't worry about how you come across or the rawness of your thoughts; let God sort that out. He knows everything about you, and He knows what you need and what you are trying to express, so there's no need to put up a good front, even if it's just for your own self-image. The Lord wants you to focus on Him, and the rest will follow.

For some of the members of Jesus's audience, I bet this admonition came as a heart-lifting relief. Maybe they hadn't realized that God would hear them and heed them even if they didn't get the words exactly right, even if they didn't have the learning and the eloquence of the religious elite. We too should find our hearts lifted by this. Our Heavenly Father wants us to talk to Him; He wants alone time with us! That's a beautiful thought, isn't it?

Jesus's final warning in this section may seem the most alien to us. When you fast, He says, don't make a production out of it. Don't do it in order to be seen; in fact, go out of your way to hide it.

The expectation that followers of Christ will make a practice of fasting, of going without food for set periods of time, just as the Jews did, is simply assumed in Scripture. The hows and whys of fasting are a topic for another day. For the moment, let's just think of fasting as any kind of abstinence or self-discipline for a higher purpose. This is an idea with solid biblical roots. There are many things which are not bad in themselves but which we ought to abstain from, from time to time, for our own greater good, the good of others, and in order to learn to rely more fully on God.

But it is all too easy for us to let fasting, or any kind of austerity or self-discipline, become an end in itself, especially when it wins the admiration of others. In Jesus's day and in many other historical periods, those who engaged in the most severe deprivation might gain a reputation as being the most holy. If this is hard for us to imagine today, think about how some people make a big show of giving up plastic bags or straws or eating animal products in order to demonstrate their environmentalist commitments. It's not that such sacrifices are wrong or pointless, by no means! We should probably all do more of such things to take care of the planet. But it does seem sometimes, doesn't it, that people put more emphasis on being seen doing these things than actually doing them? If we are honest with ourselves, we can all imagine or recall a scenario in which we too made a show of our own deprivation in order to consciously or unconsciously win the admiration of others.

Jesus sees right through us. He knows how easy it is to get sucked into doing the right things for the wrong reasons. There is probably nothing more seductive than the desire to be thought well of. Some people are content for the world to know they are rascals if they get everything else they want, but most of us would prefer a good reputation and the admiration of the people whose opinions we most value. When we are doing the right thing, what we want most is credit.

The problem is not so much that this is a sinful instinct but that it is misdirected. It is our Heavenly Father we should aim to please, not the crowds, not the elites, not even our family and friends. Jesus does not want us to be preoccupied with putting on a show for the world or even for ourselves. Why settle for such a paltry reward? It is God's reward we should seek, and what is God's reward but everlasting and loving communion with Him? The lover's true reward is to have his or her beloved. It is no different between the Father and His beloved children.

What Jesus is saying, ultimately, with His three-part warning against hypocrisy, is that our actions and our motives must be in harmony, as His were. But how do we go about this?

Excess self-consciousness is not the solution. We want our gaze fixed on the Lord, not on ourselves. But there is no getting around the need for daily self-examination. Hypocrisy is always the last sin which we suspect in ourselves and the easiest one in which to fall, because it can look for all the world like we are doing the right things and still be doing them for the wrong reasons. And that ruins everything.

It is no accident that this portion of the Sermon on the Mount includes the Lord's Prayer. Jesus gives us a model of how to pray so that we don't have to get lost in a vortex of navel-gazing or stressing about the eloquence of our words. He redirects our focus and our heart.

First, we look to God and His Kingdom and His will. We have to get our priorities straight. Then, we are to matter-of-factly present our needs and confess our sins and ask for forgiveness. There is no need to flatter God or pile up empty phrases. This is a relationship built on honesty and intimacy. And then, because we have been forgiven, we forgive others. That is the kind of relationship we should have with other people, one rooted in love and forgiveness and not in trying to impress one another or putting on a show.

Jesus wants us to take off the masks. The ones we wear to impress others. The ones we think we need to win God's favor. The ones we wear to hide

from ourselves. He wants us to come before the Father with no secrets, no pretensions, and no illusions about our ability to be righteous on our own. He wants us to find our reward in Him and the rest will follow.

What a blessed relief this is! What a beautiful invitation to come before the Lord as ourselves, without having to hide behind a mask or put on a performance. We don't need to put on a veneer of piety, because the Lord aims to transform us from the inside out. He does not want us to be actors, because He will make us into the real thing. Then, when we let our light shine before others, it will radiate from a flame that cannot be snuffed out.

That is the kind of piety that Jesus wants us to have, the kind of righteousness He aims for us to practice. The kind that lets nothing – not temptation, not self-deception, not concern for praise nor glory nor our own self-image – come between us and Him.

To Jesus be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.