

X-Ray Vision or Self-Understanding?

How Jesus Detects Authenticity and Hypocrisy

20th After Pentecost, October 27, 2019

Such a simple parable.... Yet such a very difficult theme.... In our society, the word "religion" has, for many, become synonymous with "*hypocrisy*." Why is this so?

- * It's not **just** because of the big scandals of the past (like the slaughters of the Crusades; or the dehumanizing "conversions" & slaveries of the Colonial eras.)
- * It's not **just** because of the big scandals that hit the news today, once they can no longer be hidden (like the violence of residential schools for Indigenous children and their parents; or the cover-ups of pedophile priests, preying on the unsuspecting children of their parishes.)
- * Such massive scandals most surely shape public opinion about hypocrisy in religion.
- * But, for many, the "well" of religion has been tainted by much more ordinary, garden-variety experiences of hypocrisy which they have encountered in everyday interactions with religious people in their own lives. With family, friends, neighbors & coworkers -- who can quickly spin grand tales about the Glory of God & others' need to surrender to the Divine Will -- but who are *themselves*.... not very *just*, or *compassionate*; or *forgiving*; in how they relate to others or to themselves.
- * The scandals of religious hypocrisy are not just a Christian problem. They're also a Jewish and a Muslim problem; a Buddhist and a Hindu problem. **All** of the great world religions grapple with the scandals of hypocrisy. No one of them is "clean" in this respect. But, thankfully, they **all** (Christianity included) seem to be getting less good at hiding it, perhaps because more & more of their disciples are growing up & coming forward & speaking the truth.

In the gospels, Jesus exposed the scandals of religious hypocrisy wherever he found them. As did the Hebrew prophets. As did the prophet Mohammad. As did the Buddha. Peace be upon them.

But, for us, our primary concern is naturally with how **Jesus** understood & responded to this great problem which can afflict religions of all kinds.

Right at the beginning of this morning's gospel text, Luke gives us a definition of religious hypocrisy. It's not **simply** those who "say one thing and do another." It refers to those "*who trust in themselves that they are righteous and regard others with contempt*." It's a very simple, very helpful, and profoundly insightful definition -- partly because it **excludes** people who are often labeled "religious hypocrites" in our society. It **excludes** those who are **conscious** of their inner character flaws, and are actively **seeking** God's help to repair them; but who, *nevertheless*, frequently stumble, and sometimes fall. These are not "hypocrites." Only a confused society would label them as such. These are just ordinary, flawed -- *and yet wise* -- persons of faith, who are practicing, and making progress, however slowly, at becoming more like God, more fully human, inwardly & outwardly. This is "par for the course" of the spiritual life, not hypocrisy. Far from it! For these folks recognize that -- in themselves alone, without divine co-operation -- they are not "holy." And this self-knowledge saves them from **contempt** toward "other" flawed & fallible human beings. In fact, they recognize them as their "**kin**" -- as persons who are in-the-middle-of the same human predicament that they are. And so, even when they encounter those who are deeply entrenched in harmful patterns of character -- "thieves & rogues" -- *they know that "there, but-for-the-grace-of-God, go I."* Their self-understanding effectively prevents them from becoming "holier-than-thou;" effectively dissolves their contempt (*though they will surely still be tempted to move in these directions*.) They understand that the spiritual life is about making progress, not attaining perfection. They're not hypocrites. Rather, they mirror the character of the "Tax Collector" in Jesus' parable. **Real** religious hypocrisy, Jesus suggests, mirrors the character of the "Pharisee" in the parable (*which, we know, was not the character of **all** Pharisees, but of a corrupt subgroup among them*.)

Notice that the focus of this "Pharisee" is on **outward acts** -- acts of a very "good," very "spiritual" kind. Acts that when people saw him performing them, they might assume that his outer actions must surely be flowing "*out-of-the-goodness-of-his-heart*." For, like today, many in those days were certain that those who "**do**" good must surely "**be**" good -- must surely be *just, compassionate, generous*, and so on -- in the deeper, hidden patterns of their personal characters. But, in truth, there is great conflict between this Pharisee's "insides" and his outer actions. He has the "forms" of faith, but lacks the "substance" in the contents of his character.

In a slightly different way, when people saw the "Tax Collector" -- a profession that in those days was **infamous** for its corruption -- they might assume that **whatever** he may be doing, even if it **appears** holy, he must surely be up-to-no-good. For many were quite certain that **all** tax collectors had the same vicious inner character which, they imagined, was beyond redemption. "Would that God would send them all to Sheol!" ... It's remarkable how even the colour of a person's skin--or the shape of their nose--or the pitch of their voice--can make us confident that we know **the contents of their character**. Maybe it goes back to the Garden and that clever *snake* who *seemed* like "such a really nice guy."

Jesus, however, sees both the "Pharisee" and the "Tax Collector" as they actually are – not just on the surface, but in their depths.

How does he do that? We might say, "*Well, he's the Son of God, so of course he can do that!*" But taking refuge in one-liners like these can often be a "cop-out." For, after all, "we *can't possibly be expected* to be able to do the same as the only begotten Son of God, now can we?" Instead of strolling down that path (which is truly a dead-end), we'd be much better off asking ourselves **how** -- *in a very practical sense* -- **is Jesus able to "read" others so very well?**

It's not because he has x-ray vision, although it sometimes seems that way. Nor is it magic. **It's "know-how."**

Jesus can discern & understand the inner dynamics at work in other people, *because he has **already** discerned & understood these dynamics at work **within himself**, within his own humanity, the humanity he shares with us all.*

This is how he knows... that what may seem on the surface to be "a pretty little white house" can actually be a "white-washed tomb"; that what may seem like a clean cup "on the outside" can actually be quite filthy "on the inside." And it's **also** how he knows that a very troubled tree – *a tree that has been through so much rough weather, and is so outwardly ravaged, that it seems to have degenerated altogether* – can still be inwardly **robust** – healthy enough to bear sweet moral fruit.

Jesus is not fooled by surface behaviors, however good or evil they may appear to the casual observer. **Because he doesn't fool himself** about the roots of his own actions. Jesus is not fooled by social stereotypes about how certain people "really **are**" in their hearts, however confidently such judgments may be held by those around him. **Because he doesn't fool himself** into thinking he's something that he's not. Because, through regular practice, Jesus has come to understand the inner workings of his own human heart & mind & character.

We see this throughout the gospels:

- * How Jesus has learned that, all-the-time, experiences of **all** kinds suddenly "just happen" -- **to him & within him & around him** -- *just as they do for all human beings.*
- * How Jesus has learned that he very quickly forms an **understanding** of these experiences and an **intention** of how best to respond to them. *Just as we all do.*
- * But how – *often unlike us* – Jesus doesn't just "act" at this point in the process. He's learned to inwardly **pause** at this point -- to reflect with his Father on how he's understanding his experiences -- so that he can rightly judge the **truth** of his understandings and the **goodness** of his intentions; and so replace the false & harmful with the true & good. He does this "automatically," because he's learned through experience that, like all human beings, **he is not beyond temptation**; and that within himself alone, **he can do nothing**. He's learned that his inner & outer integrity – his righteousness – depends wholly on his Father's influence in his life. So he pauses.....
- * And *even after that -- even with all of that remarkable self-understanding* -- he **still** does not act. Instead, he **chooses** -- he **decides** -- how & when he will act, depending on his context, on who's involved, and the "rightness" of the time. Sometimes he decides that the best action is non-action, utter silence. But whatever he decides, he makes his decisions -- as usual – in communion & co-operation with his invisible Father.
- * **And then.....finally.....**, he simply acts. It sounds like a laborious process, doesn't it? How did Jesus ever get anything done? And what about spontaneity? What about "just doing it" ? Well, Jesus **does** act "spontaneously" – *fluidly* – with *ease* -- because he's highly **practiced** at following these inner steps of self-understanding. He can effortlessly run through them all, like a concert pianist runs through the keys on her keyboard. And he trains his apprentices – his "disciples" – how to develop the same "know-how." For **how else** would they become like him?

We can't help but see in the gospels that there's a whole lot going on – "invisibly" – behind Jesus' simple outward actions. What we often fail to see, though, is that Jesus has **learned** how all of this "*unseen stuff*" in human beings actually works -- he has acquired the "expertise," the "know-how" of it all -- because he's studied the entire process within himself, again & again, under the wise guidance of his Father (*and likely also his Mother!*) This is **how** – **he knows how** -- to understand other people beneath the surface. It's not x-ray vision. It's genuine self-understanding. And we develop it by following the same practical steps that Jesus did.

It wouldn't even be going too far to say that such self-understanding is what the "new covenant," the religion of Jesus, is all about. For this is **HOW** the Divine Law (of loving God absolutely & our neighbors as ourselves) gets "written" into the depths of our hearts & minds, where the private patterns of our personal characters get formed, & **re**-formed, & **trans**-formed, into the image & likeness of God. This is what we followers of Jesus are called & given grace to practice.

Learning this; **practicing** this; coming to **believe** this; **teaching** this -- is ultimately how we **prevent** the scandals, small & large, which persuade our society that the Church is "full of hypocrites." It's also how we **recover** from scandals when they do happen, in our own lives, and in the life of Church at large. It's the best, and the only real, "solution" to religious hypocrisy. May God lovingly, patiently teach us all the steps of this most fundamental practice of our faith. For our good, and the good of all the Church. Amen.