

GOOD NEWS FOR HYPOCRITES

Scriptures: Isaiah 1:10-20; Luke 3:7-18

This story was passed on to me over the internet:

A preacher finished the service one morning by saying, "Next Sunday, I am going to preach on the subjects of liars. As preparation, I would like you all to read Mark 17." The next Sunday the preacher asked how many had read the scripture he suggested. Nearly every hand went up. The pastor then said, "You are the people I want to talk to. Mark has only 16 chapters."

People are sometimes shocked to discover that the percentage of sinners inside the church is just as high as the percentage of sinners outside the church. It was that way even in the Old Testament. The book of Isaiah begins with a scathing denunciation of sinners. Isaiah 1:4:

Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged!

It sounds like he is talking to a bunch of drug dealers or child abusers or people who go skiing on Sundays. But he is not. If you read further you will discover he is talking here to church-goers. Listen again to Isaiah 1:12-14. The Lord says,

When you come to appear before me, who asked this (offerings and sacrifices) from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; (This is not a very good scripture for a pledge drive!) incense is an abomination to me. New moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.

The Lord is talking here to church-goers: people who attend worship, people who pay their pledges, people who bring offerings and make pies for the bake sale and sing in the choir and come to the Christmas Eve services and serve on the session or deacons. They are all hypocrites, Isaiah says, people whose lives do not match their faith.

The same was true in Jesus' day. In our first scripture lesson John the Baptist tears into the Jews who come to him wanting to be baptized. He says,

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

John is not preaching here to people at the Dead End Tavern or the Déjà vu strip club. He is talking to people who walked miles into the desert to attend a revival meeting. These are descendants of Abraham, God's chosen people, people who have come wanting to be baptized, and John calls them a bunch of snakes.

Basically they are hypocrites. They worship God one day of the week, but the other days they act as if God does not exist. At home they treat their families in ways they would never treat them in public, as if God does not see them behind closed doors. At work they make decisions based on what they can get away with, not what God would approve. When it comes to their own wrongs, they expect God's forgiveness, but when it comes to the wrongs done by others, they want retribution.

In his book *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn tells about his friendship with a fellow Russian army officer during the World War II. He describes how much in common he had with his friend. They had many of the same hopes, dreams, and beliefs. But after the war their lives took completely different directions. Solzhenitsyn became a prisoner for standing up against Stalin's reign of terror. His friend became one of Stalin's interrogators, torturing people into making false confessions. Solzhenitsyn wondered how he and his friend could have turned out so differently when they both had such similar values and beliefs. But then Solzhenitsyn made an important discovery. He writes,

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deed, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them.

That, in a way, is what John the Baptist suggests. "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." That is one way to take care of hypocrites. But will there be anyone left? Solzhenitsyn continues,

But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart? During the life of any heart this line keeps changing place; sometimes it is squeezed one way by exuberant evil and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish. One and the same human being is, at various ages, under various circumstances, a totally different human being. At times he is close to being a devil, at times to sainthood (p. 168).

Isn't that a definition of hypocrisy: acting like one kind of person in certain situation, like at church, and acting differently when somewhere else? The problem of hypocrisy runs deep. It goes to the very core of our being, where no one but God can get to it.

But here is the Good News: God can bring new life even to hypocrites. Isaiah 1:18 says, "Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord." Let's deal with this! "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool."

Notice, God does not simply ignore our sin. God does not simply look the other way. But nor does God cut us down and throw us out. Rather God accepts us, despite our sin, and then goes to work on us to make us new people.

In Luke 3, right after John the Baptist says, "Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire"—right after that bit of good news, the people say to

John, “What then should we do?” John replies, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

Remember what Isaiah said in chapter 1, verses 16-17: “Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” The good news for hypocrites is that God accepts you just as you are. But the even better news is that God will not leave you that way. God is determined to replace your greed with generosity. God is determined to replace your self-centeredness with compassion. God is determined to replace your pride with a sense of community and your gloom with a sense of hope and love. To accept God’s forgiveness means to let God get a hold of your life, slowly and imperfectly perhaps, but steadily and relentlessly, until we discover what being part of God’s family is all about.

Friends, do not be surprised that the church is full of hypocrites. The church has always been full of hypocrites. The church was designed for hypocrites—hypocrites who will never be the same for having been here.

- Ken Onstot