

Growing Up

As a kid growing up, I made a long list of stuff my folks said to me and my brothers and sisters that I would never, NEVER! I SAY, use on my kids.

That vow lasted until I had my own children of course, and I will never forget the day when I told my then 13-year-old daughter that she would do as I say and not as I do!

As the last of those words came out of my mouth, I was seized by the horror that indeed, I had become my mother!

I remember objecting vigorously to being told “Do as I say, not as I do” because of, well, to be blunt, the sheer hypocrisy of it.

After all, my teenage mind reasoned, how can you possibly impose on me a standard that you yourself won’t or can’t live up to?

What I learned after being afflicted with children of my own to raise is that as parents, we strive for the best in our children, even when that means setting standards that we ourselves cannot always attain.

The teen on the receiving end will always call it hypocritical.

We parents call it: “Aiming higher than you can reach.”

Today’s gospel got me thinking about proper teaching and it’s shadowy twin: hypocrisy.

What we have today is Jesus just getting warmed up before engaging in a full frontal assault on the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious big shots of the day.

What comes right after what we hear today are woe after woe aimed at these big shots, with Jesus comparing them to whitewashed tombs, pretty on the outside but filthy on the inside; he accuses them of murdering the prophets, of being nothing more than snakes in the grass.

And over the years, many, many Christians listening to all of this act like spectators at a street fight, cheering on Jesus as he pummels the Jewish leaders.

That is not the lesson we should take from this reading.

What Jesus is confronting is not a particular group who had somehow cornered the market on hypocrisy: Jesus was a Jew confronting his own people; in the long tradition of God's prophets.

And because of that, he is pointing out that hypocrisy is part and parcel of what it means to be a human being: it belongs to each and every one of us; and it is a reality to which we each of us might pay attention in our own lives, in the life of our community.

There are plenty of folks who say they will never darken a church door because churches are full of hypocrites.

And they are right.

As long as churches are made up of human beings, they are right.

But hypocrisy is little more than the shadow side of a life striving for God.

Hypocrisy is the name we give it when we fail to live faithfully into who we are called to become: when we don't practice what we preach.

The evil of hypocrisy arises not because it occurs; hypocrisy is a daily companion because we none of us always walk our talk.

No, the evil of hypocrisy arises when we deny that it exists.

Denial prevents recognition; and recognition is required if we are to grow into the Way of God.

Like the young man gazing out of the window at life's pettiness, its meanness, its shallowness, only to have the light shift, and the window becomes a mirror, and he sees himself, clearly, and for the first time.

Jesus gives some very direct advice today.

Don't create classes.

Don't put anyone on a pedestal.

Don't bow down to another person.

Instead, live together as children of one Father; sharing what you have, respecting each other as equals, recognizing that none of us are spiritual CEO's; none of us has a reserved parking spot in the Kingdom of God; and none of us in the eyes of God is better than that gal over here or that guy over there.

And through it all is practice and practice and more practice.

As the old monk said to the young man who asked what the monks do all day:

"We stand up and we fall down, we stand up and we fall down, we stand up and we fall down, we stand up...."

The problem Jesus confronts so directly today is the problem of believers who think they never fall down.

It is the problem of believers who elbow their way to the front of the line, who know deep down inside that they are totally together and that everyone else is a lost cause.

When dealing with mules, Jesus knows that sometimes a two by four between the eyes is required to get the necessary attention.

But for most of us, the two by four treatment is probably not necessary.

Instead, it is very much a matter of practice.

I'll tell you a story I've told you before, but today it's worth telling again.

It's the story of the 'The Happy Hypocrite,' the story "Max Beerbohm tells about a regency rake named Lord George Hell, debauched and profligate, who falls in love with a saintly girl, and in order to win her love, covers his bloated features with the mask of a saint."

"The girl is deceived and becomes his bride, and they live together happily until a wicked lady from Lord George Hell's wicked past turns up to expose him for the scoundrel she knows him to be and challenges him to take off his mask."

"So sadly, having no choice, he takes it off, and lo and behold beneath the saint's mask is the face of the saint he had become by wearing it in love."

Buechner, Telling the Truth, 80.

Lord George aimed higher than he could reach, and with practice and with the grace of God, the "Happy Hypocrite," perhaps he is you; perhaps he is me; became who he always was: a saint of God.