

A Haven For Hypocrites
Luke 6:37-42
NUCC Traditional
24 February 2019

*PRAY

Author Tim Storey tells a great story about how easy it is to rush to pass judgement on others. Tim pulled up in front of his neighborhood barbershop and parked. As he fished around for his wallet, he felt the sickening crunch of metal hitting metal. Somebody hit his car! What an idiot! But when he jumped out to look, Tim didn't see anyone. As he was muttering under his breath about stupid drivers, a little old lady came out of the barbershop and announced, "Don't worry sir, I saw the whole thing." Turns out, he was the stupid driver. Instead of putting his car in park, Tim had accidentally shifted it into reverse. No one had hit him; he had backed into the car behind him.

Or perhaps you have heard about the leader in another church who was asked to speak to a junior high Sunday school class. The teacher wanted him to talk about the positive aspects of being a Christian, such as how his faith determined his business decisions and set his family priorities. Some of the students began to lose attention.

So, in an effort to keep their attention, he suddenly stopped, pointed at one boy, and said, "Do you know why people call me a Christian?"

The startled teenager sat up and replied, "Is it because they don't know you?"

Hypocrisy. We know what it looks like. We know what it sounds like. And we cheer when Jesus turns to speak against it. That's what Jesus is doing in the passage we heard this morning: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?"

At least nineteen times in the gospels, Jesus takes on people whom he calls hypocrites. The Greek word is taken from the acting stage. “Hypocrites” are actors or actresses. They put on a show, supposedly for the benefit of others. They wear costumes and masks, so their appearance does not reflect who they really are. There is a difference between their outward appearance on stage and who they actually are when no-one but God is looking.

According to one wry definition found in a wonderful book entitled *The Devil’s Dictionary*, hypocrites are those “...who, professing virtues that they do not respect, secure the advantage of seeming to be what they despise.”

“Let me take that speck out of your eye.” With a self-deprecating air, they mean, “Let me take care of you. Let me point something out to you.” All the while they totally ignore their own inability to see clearly. On the surface, it sounds like they want to care; but something else is going on behind the mask.

As one commentator points out, this kind of hypocrisy is all the more unpleasant “because an apparent act of kindness (taking a speck of dirt from somebody’s eye) is made the means of inflating our own ego.” That is, it looks like these people are trying to help others, when actually they are trying to feel better about themselves. They exalt themselves by pointing out something deficient about their neighbors. Then they try to help others in their weakness from a position of superiority. “Here,” they say with transparent deference, “let me help you get that speck out of your eye.” We know it when we see it.

Have you ever noticed that when somebody criticizes you, the criticism usually has more to do with them than you? Most likely they are flinging their baggage at you rather than carrying it themselves.

A woman recently went through some personal difficulties. She said, "When I went through my divorce, the people who gave me the hardest time were people who came from their own troubled households. On the other hand, the people who saved my life were those who knew what it was like to go through something like that; they helped me come through it alive."

It reminds me of the day when Snoopy was sitting on the roof of his doghouse. Charlie Brown came up and said, "I hear you're writing a book on theology. I hope you have a good title."

Snoopy replied, "I have the perfect title." Then he leaned over his typewriter and typed, "Has It Ever Occurred to You That You Might Be Wrong?"

That's the question for every one of us to ask ourselves if we are ever going to get rid of the lumberyard in our own eyelashes. Jesus uses this ridiculous image to score his point. None of us have a problem turning to another person and seeing faults. All of us have a lot of problem owning up to our own shortcomings and faults. It's difficult to get a proper perspective.

And along with that perspective, we must also gain some humor. A woman named Lois volunteered to help with a congregational mailing. As she scanned the address list, she noted a lot of people had drifted away from the life of the church. She picked up the phone and began to call them. "We've been missing you in all kinds of ways. Why don't you come back next Sunday?"

She called one man and got nowhere. The next week, she called him again with the same result. The following week she tried again. Finally, he said, "Don't you get it? I'm not going back to that church. There are too many hypocrites in the congregation."

Lois laughed, and she said, "Yeah, you're right. We have a church full of hypocrites. And we always have room for one more."

The man began to laugh. The next week, he was sitting in the fourth pew. After that, he was back almost every Sunday. Most of the time he had a smile on his face.

Or the story told of the man who was once again in trouble with the law and this time facing a steep fine. His mother, a poor widow, wrote a letter to the judge, asking him to overturn the judgement and forget the fine. She explained that her son was broke and unemployed; and it would fall on her shoulders to pay his fine. The financial burden was more than she could bear.

With tears in his eyes, the judge signed the docket which sealed the poor man's fate and adjourned the court. To remit the fine would violate his oath to uphold the law, and justice would suffer for the sake of mercy. But when the judge wrote back to the widow, he enclosed with his letter a personal check to cover both the fine and court costs. Concluding his letter, he said, "I send this check with joy because it gives me the opportunity to be both merciful and just."

I believe that this is the kind of God we worship today: a perfect judge, both merciful and just. And aren't we commanded *not* to judge one another? Until we can love as God loves, we cannot judge as God judges. Let us continue to be a church that is a beautiful and overflowing "haven for hypocrites."