

Hypocrisy Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Hypocrisy. That's what all the Democrat politicians are screaming, as President Trump has nominated Amy Coney Barrett to fill Ruth Bader Ginsburg's seat on the US Supreme Court. It's the height of hypocrisy, they say, for Republicans in the Senate to vote to confirm such a nominee this close to a presidential election when they refused even to hold hearings on President Obama's nomination of Merrick Garland in March of 2016.

Of course, they are conveniently forgetting that so many of them insisted in 2016 that the Senate do exactly what today's Republicans want to do: act on a President's nominee for the Supreme Court, no matter how close it may be to the next election. And in fact, back in 2016, Justice Ginsburg herself argued that it was the Senate's job to take a vote on Garland's nomination. She said, "There's nothing in the Constitution that says the president stops being the president in his last year." Yes, where it comes to politics, there's always plenty of hypocrisy to go around. I suppose it's no wonder that only 21 percent of Americans approve of our Congress as a whole.

But hypocrisy is just as bad for the church, isn't it? Don't we all know people who refuse to attend public worship? Oh, it's not because they're afraid of the COVID virus, but because they don't want to be around people they consider to be hypocrites. You've heard their objections: "How can those Christians pretend to be so holy, so pious on Sunday mornings and then turn around and act the way they do the rest of the week? If that's what it means to follow Jesus, I don't want any part of it." Maybe you've heard things like that. Maybe you've said things like that.

Yes, we all recognize that blatant hypocrisy – saying holy, loving things while doing selfish, sinful things at the same time – gives the church a black eye. Such hypocrisy compromises our mission to reach the world with the truth of Christ. But in today's passage, Jesus points out a more subtle, a more hidden kind of hypocrisy. And this kind of hypocrisy doesn't keep other people from coming to Christ. No, this kind of fundamental dishonesty pulls us away from Him. For this kind of hypocrisy involves doing the right thing for the wrong reasons.

Now, we cannot doubt that Jesus approves of the behaviors He calls into question in today's passage. Giving alms? Helping the poor? Jesus Himself fed 5,000 families with five barley loaves and two fish, didn't He? Moreover, He taught all who would follow Him to be generous with those who are the most helpless: "Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Luke 12:33-34).

And what about prayer? Again, the Son of God demonstrated how important prayer was to Him, as He often went off to spend time alone with His Father. In fact, He prayed with His disciples at the Last Supper, right before going to the Garden of Gethsemane, where He poured out His heart to God: "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou *wilt*" (Matthew 26:39). Oh yes, Jesus knew all about the importance of prayer.

And Jesus also practiced the spiritual discipline of fasting: abstaining from food for a time in order to focus one's attention more completely on God. Immediately after His baptism, Jesus fasted in the desert for 40 days to prepare Himself for all the trials and the temptations of His ministry. And when the going gets tough, as it is for the Church these days, we would do well to follow His example.

No, Jesus had no problem with pious deeds like charity and prayer and fasting – He just didn't want us to become proud of them. For it is so easy for us to draw our assurance not from the promises of God but from our good works. It is so easy for us to put our faith, not in Christ alone, but in the things we do or leave undone. And such a faith is the essence of legalism: trusting in some sort of law-keeping in order to gain favor in the sight of God.

Now, we all know that many people in the days of Jesus' earthly ministry were unabashed legalists. The Sadducees sought God's favor by performing all the Temple rituals. The Pharisees sought God's favor by trying to keep God's moral and ethical requirements down to the letter – in fact, they expanded many of the laws, trying to go even farther than what God required. Most famously, and most ridiculously, the Pharisees insisted that Jesus not heal any sick people on the Sabbath, because they interpreted such obvious displays of God's divine power as some sort of human work that desecrated God's holy day.

But wasn't just a problem for the ancient opponents of Jesus. In fact, most of the world's modern faith traditions are based on some system of legalism – things to do and things to avoid. Buddhists, for example, follow the eightfold path that they think will lead to enlightenment. Muslims think that observing the five pillars of Islam – which include prayer, giving alms, and fasting – will earn them favor in the sight of Allah.

But many people who consider themselves to be Christians also fall into the trap of legalism, placing their trust not in Christ alone, but in some expression of obedience to God. Some, for example, put their faith in regularly taking the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Others take comfort in the fact that they walked the aisle, said the sinner's prayer, and received the sacrament of baptism. Still others are proud of their abstinence from tobacco or alcohol, while looking down on those who smoke or drink.

And it's that pride, the pride that springs from congratulating ourselves on completing our religious to-do list, the pride that springs from comparing ourselves to other people, it's that sort of puffing ourselves up while we put other people down that Jesus identifies as the biggest problem with any sort of legalism. For the kind of hypocrites He condemns in today's passage perform godly works while keeping their gaze fixed firmly in the mirror. Yes, they help the poor and pray and fast, but only so that other people will think well of them.

But that's exactly the opposite of what these good works are supposed to do. Think about helping the needy – it's perhaps the clearest, most obvious way in which we fulfill the second part of the Great Commandment: "Love your neighbors as you love yourselves."

And we have many such examples of generosity all around us, don't we? We were so thankful for the Cajun navy, all those folks from Louisiana who brought their boats to help people on the Mississippi Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina. And many Mississippians have recently returned the favor, heading to Monroe and Alexandria and Lake Charles with our pickup trucks and chainsaws to help clear the debris left by Hurricane Laura. Times of desperate need, times like these, allow Christians to show our love for one another in such clear and compelling ways.

But if we were only hauling the logs and putting tarps on the roofs and hooking up the generators to feel good about ourselves, or to make other people admire us, we wouldn't really be loving our neighbors, would we? We'd just be using their tough situation to polish up our own image.

Or think about the sweet hour of prayer, the most intimate form of communication we have with God. Prayer is the time we draw closest to God, giving Him praise, confessing our deepest sins and

desires, and holding up our loved ones before Him in confidence and assurance. In prayer, we are supposed to be completely focused on God.

And the same thing is true of fasting. By setting aside some of God's good gifts for a time, fasting is a concrete way of putting the Creator ahead of the creation on our priority list. Just as prayer is a great way of putting God first where it comes to our time, fasting is the way we put God first on our list of desires. Both fasting and prayer are thus efforts to keep the first part of the Great Commandment: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.

But what if we were to give and pray and fast for the reason Jesus describes in today's passage? What if we were praying just so that other people would admire our piety? What if we were to fast just so that people would think we are somehow holier than they are? We wouldn't be loving God at all, would we? We'd just be faking a closeness to God in order to build ourselves up in the eyes of others.

So, what good would that kind of self-centered fasting and prayer do? Would they really draw us closer to God? Of course not. In seeking to feel good about ourselves, in seeking to build up our own pride in our own spiritual achievements, such fasting and prayer would actually drive us farther away from Him. It's no wonder that Jesus says that admiration from other people is the only kind of reward such false piety receives. Self-focused fasting and prayer are spiritually sterile.

And the same thing is true of our gifts. If we are putting offerings in the plate out of a sense of pride, if we're giving so that we can feel good about ourselves, we're not really loving our neighbors, no matter how much we may be helping them. Such giving certainly doesn't draw us closer to God.

So, is Jesus saying that we shouldn't give any sort of public help to other people? Does this mean that it's wrong to go clear debris in Monroe or Alexandria or Lake Charles? After all, it's impossible to do such things in secret.

Or to push this point a bit further, is Jesus saying that we shouldn't gather for prayer and worship, that we shouldn't join with others in prayer and praise? Perhaps you know some folks who have drawn that conclusion. Perhaps you've heard folks say, "I can worship God by myself just as well on my deck or my patio or in my deerstand as I can by going to church." And during this COVID pandemic, many of us are having to do just that, whether we want to or not.

But remember, in this passage Jesus is calling our motivations into question, not our actions. He's probing the reasons that we give and pray and fast. He's asking why we do these things. He's testing our focus. So the real question isn't so much whether other people know how much we give, but how much we care about how what they know. The real problem isn't so much where we fast and pray but how we fast and pray.

After all, when Jesus divided the five loaves and the two fish, 5000 families knew exactly Who was responsible for giving them the big meal they ate. In the same way, when Jesus came to the tomb of His friend Lazarus, He was surrounded by all those who had come to weep with Martha and Mary. And yet in that very public place, He prayed to His Father right before summoning Lazarus out of the tomb – and He prayed specifically "because of the people standing around."

But why did Jesus perform so many public miracles? For the same reason that He offered that prayer before the tomb of Lazarus: "That they may believe that You have sent me" (John 11:42). Jesus fasted and prayed and gave all He had to poor sinners like us, not as expressions of His pride, and not to make himself look good, but so that we might be drawn closer to God, so that we might be blessed, so that we might be saved. His focus was completely on the Father and on us, not on Himself.

So, Christians, is the same thing true for us? Is that why we fast and pray and give? Are we really focused on the needs of our neighbors? Are we really trying to draw closer to God and closer to one another?

If not, maybe we need to spend some time alone with God, confessing our sin. Maybe we need to give up enjoying some of God's gifts for a time so that we might get our focus back where it needs to be. Maybe we need to devote more of our time, talent, and treasure to the work of the Kingdom, so that others might be drawn into a closer relationship with God.

In other words, maybe we need to take some time to be holy, to be set apart from the sin of self-centered, self-congratulatory pride, to be set apart for God. Maybe then we can recover the real blessing to be found in giving and praying and fasting – a blessing for God and for others, not for ourselves.