

"Hypocrisy and Law"

Scripture Passages: 1) Psalm 42
2) Luke 7:36-8:3
3) Galatians 2:11-21

My First Call: As we go through life we are continually learning all kinds of different lessons. I was having a conversation with Kristen Garceau recently about her son Kevin and his present job search. He graduated from Michigan Tech in geology and is hunting for a job in the mining industry. Tom and Kristen have been trying to help him know how to ask good questions, and be a positive interviewee.

I know that has been an area of struggle in my life. When I graduated from seminary I had worked 7 or 8 different jobs but never had an interview. Jobs just seemed to find me. That was not the case after seminary. I was cleared for ordination and searching for a call by about February of my final semester of school. It wasn't long after putting my Personnel Information Form into the system that I started taping the rejection letters on the back of our apartment door. After the door was filled we put them on the wall. It became the wall of shame.

Eventually graduation rolled around and then we needed to be out of our student housing. We moved back to Colorado and continued our job search from there. Finally, after about three months in Colorado I started to receive a number of opportunities for real interviews. Looking back, I really had no idea what I was doing, or what I was looking for. I just wanted to be a pastor, work with youth, point people to Jesus, help people out. I was mainly interested in Associate Pastor Positions where I could do youth ministry. When one came along in North Platte, Nebraska it seemed like the ticket. But it wasn't long before I realized that I truly did not know anything about asking questions, discerning what was real in a situation. I was extremely naïve about the church.

The Head of Staff and I split most of the committee meetings, but we had a few meetings that we both attended. I don't remember what the committee was called, whether it was membership or pastoral care or visitation, but one of their traditions in that meeting was that we went around the table and each person told how many visits to people they had made since our last meeting. As we went around the table the lay people would say two or three visits. This was brand new to me. No one had informed me that we would be sharing this statistic. So at my first meeting I quickly ran through my mind and said 10 or 12. Then the Head of Staff went and said, 55. I was in awe. Wow! This guy must visit people all the time.

As time passed, this same scenario happened every month, and the reported numbers were about the same, every month. The longer I was there the more uncomfortable I became with this strange ritual.

Early on the Head of Staff and I had agreed to take different days visiting the hospital. I took Friday through Sunday; the Head of Staff took Monday through Thursday. As time went on my experience was that I would go visit on Friday and the people I would visit would tell me they were so glad to see me nobody had been by all week. I heard that regularly and yet every month at the visitation meeting these huge numbers would be shared in relationship to how many visits had taken place. I quickly realized that I was in an extremely difficult and unpleasant situation. Paul has a similar tale that he shared with the churches in Galatia. Listen to his story as he

continued to write to the Galatians about different ways that we distort the Gospel.

Read Galatians 2:11-21

Peter: As we discover in the book of Acts Peter also did some extensive traveling to Gentile parts of the world. This was probably especially true after he was imprisoned in Jerusalem. After he escaped from prison he knew he needed to leave the area. It was during this period of his life where he may have traveled to Antioch and beyond. Antioch was a port city on the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea.

As Paul tells the story, Peter quickly realized the importance of fitting in with his new Gentile hosts. He seemed to easily give up his following of Jewish rules for food preparation, and other eating regulations. He seemed to easily give up the requirements around who was clean and who was unclean and thus who a person could eat with and spend time with. Peter seemed to understand that in order to take the Gospel to the Gentile world it was essential to fit in, after all the Jewish laws were not requirements to be recipients of God's grace.

But then one day, some of Peter's Jewish friends arrived in Antioch from Jerusalem. All of a sudden Peter changed his tune. All of a sudden he decided it was not okay to eat with his new Gentile friends. All of a sudden Peter through his actions said that faith in Jesus was not enough, but it was also important to follow the Jewish laws concerning circumcision, food preparation, and issues of cleanliness. Peter did not want his Jewish friends to think he had relaxed his own practice of the law. Peter had become a hypocrite.

Hypocrisy: If I could have a dollar for every time I have had someone say to me, "I would become a part of the church if it wasn't full of a bunch of hypocrites."

This interaction between Paul and Peter reminds us that we are all hypocrites. Even Peter, "The Rock" acted hypocritically as he wrestled with how to live out his new faith, respect his beloved traditions and also reach out to a completely new group of people who did not share those traditions. Paul had to confront Peter about his hypocrisy, about his two faced way of living out his life.

I always respond to that comment about the church being full of hypocrites by saying, "Well of course, the church is made up of humans."

We are all hypocrites. We love our neighbor one day and not the next. We are gracious to some people and not to others. We have compassion for some people, but want the death penalty for others. We want health care for some, but not for those people we don't think deserve it. And of course we believe that we have the wisdom and vision and knowledge and insight to make such choices. Like Peter we are all hypocrites.

Own It: What hopefully makes us different in the church, is that we are willing to admit that we are hypocrites, that we don't live out our faith perfectly, or even all that well. Hopefully what makes us different in the church is that we have some deep humility about our own shortcomings. That doesn't mean we denigrate ourselves, or beat ourselves up, or have a poor self image. It simply means that we are realistic about our behavior. It means that we are committed to our on-going conversion and transformation. It means that we have passion and energy for this adventure of faith where resurrection; life after death is an on-going process. When someone says, "But you are all hypocrites!" We respond, "That is true and through God's grace I am learning, growing, maturing, and responding."

Faith as Transformation: You see that is the exact issue that Paul describes as he talks about the difference between faith in Christ and the works of the law. Faith in Christ is giving our selves to the on-going, ever present adventure of becoming new creations. Following the law is the impossible pursuit of perfection. Following the law is a dead end. Faith in Christ is life-

giving. Following the law is about drawing lines in the sand. Faith in Christ is about giving ourselves to transformation. Which will we choose?

Conclusion: Today as we come to the table, can we come with humility, owning our ever-present hypocrisy? As we come to the table can we repent of our useless pursuit of perfection? As we come to the table can we give ourselves to the beautiful adventure of becoming new creations? Oh dear God, let us not be afraid! Amen.