Message: "Hypocrisy's Antidote"
Scripture: Matthew 23:1-12

> 23Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, [2]"The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat;
> [3]therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice
> what they teach. [4]They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but
> they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. [5]They do all their deeds to be seen by others;
> for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. [6]They love to have the place of honor at
> banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, [7]and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to
> have people call them rabbi. [8]But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all
> students. [9]And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. [10]Nor are you
> to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. [11]The greatest among you will be your
> servant. [12]All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Many years ago, I remember taking our teenage son Ethan to an appointment with a new doctor. The appointment went fine; Ethan was pronounced healthy; and the conclusion of our visit had the doctor outline good habits to nurture as well as things to steer clear of to keep healthy and strong. It was a good visit, and Ethan felt pretty good about it all; we went to the front desk and checked out. On our way out of the building, I remember Ethan noticing something down a ways from the hospital exit; it was a couple of people taking a smoking break. I wonder if you can guess who one of the two persons was – yes, Ethan's new doctor, smoking a cigarette. I wonder if you can imagine the look on my son's face as he turned to me? Wide-eyed with disbelief, he dropped his jaw and looked at me with a look of astonishment on his face. And I wonder if you would be able to summarize our conversation on the way home, with me trying to answer an incredulous child who had just been told never to smoke -- by someone who then went out and smoked?

My son had just received a very blunt introduction to hypocrisy.

We've all had such blunt experiences where someone said something and then did something completely opposite; it is the national pastime for our country's leadership these days, it would seem, but it is by no means limited to presidents and members of congress and persons on the campaign trail; we all have a propensity to say one thing and do another when we feel the raw edges of discomfort or the difficulty that often accompanies meaningful actions. We can quickly reverse course when we count the cost of sticking to our words.

Jesus, in our passage today, has had enough of this kind of thing. For several passages preceding this one, he has been slandered, attacked, tested, insulted, and otherwise targeted by the Pharisees and Sadducees and Scribes and other various leaders of the Jewish people. Jesus respects what they represent, what they say; but he doesn't respect what they do which is opposite to their

teaching. And it is in that contradiction that he levels one of his greatest condemnations with the words "[12]All who exalt themselves will be humbled." Their hypocrisy is their condemnation. (and please note, in these days of rising antisemitism, Jesus is NOT attacking Judaism; he is condemning hypocrisy, wherever it occurs).

But Jesus isn't just condemning the hypocrisy that says one thing while doing another. There is another type he addresses here, a form of hypocrisy very present in our world today as back then, and it is just as insidious as the first – it is the hypocrisy of doing the right thing for the wrong reason. Wearing one's faith on their sleeve is how we might put it today – being overtly verbal about being a Christian, highlighting our love of Jesus and our trust in God's grace and our confidence that God approves of our lives while giving little attention to following through on the actual directions for life Jesus gives. It's speaking with religious eloquence but living self-focused lives quite distant from God's will – and again, we hear the caution of Jesus: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled."

Many years ago my wife and I were searching for a used car our children could use to learn how to drive. We found one in the classifieds (remember those?) – it was a 2001 Buick Lesabre with a million miles on the odometer (not really). It was old, it was cheap, it had peeling paint, it looked like it would only reach highway speeds going downhill with a tailwind, and my children, once they saw it, called it the "grandma car" – in other words, it was the perfect vehicle for teenagers to practice driving. I looked up the phone number and made the call – but I was not ready for what followed. The person on the other end of the line answered the phone by saying "PRAISE GOD!" with an effusive energy that left me stunned. That was it; nothing else was said; I stood there in silence, not sure what I had just heard. After what was an uncomfortable pause to me, I finally said, "Hello?" whereupon the woman on the other end of the line said again with way too much enthusiasm "Hello! Praise God!"

Can I be honest with you? Forgive me, but I find that kind of instantaneous statement extremely annoying. She didn't know me, and I didn't know her, and to throw such a simple statement out to a stranger speaks of shallowness and artificiality and maybe even self-righteousness to me – almost as if her automatic go-to was to be seen as a Christian by the words she spontaneously chose. I have learned to be very suspicious of people who shout their faith too loudly, as if they are trying to prove their righteousness through magnified volume or enthusiastic embellishment; I have discovered such volume or embellishment often tries to

substitute for substance when it comes to faith, and it never works. It never works because doing matters more than saying, always; and this is even more critical to keep in mind when we come across any faith communication that is excessively exuberant.

Thus, my first thought regarding this woman on the other end of the line was "O man, I'm talking with a religious nut!" This did not bode well for getting a car. But somehow I awkwardly brought up the car for sale, and instantly her tone changed. "Oh, the car," she said; " let me get my husband."

Her husband then got on the phone and we began a discussion about the car; in that conversation I began to recognize who this was – another pastor. The pastor of the church three blocks from our house. The pastor of a very conservative, Pentecostal church. The pastor of a very exclusive take on theology (one where their congregation was the only one who truly followed God). Once I realized this, I almost hung up for my intense desire to avoid any kind of theological or religious conversation which would enter us into a rabbit hole of all-too-familiar disagreements. But if I hung up, I'd lose the chance to buy the car; and I'd be seen as very rude to this pastor colleague; and in the back of my mind, I knew I was judging all over the place for I did not appreciate the theology his church represented. But mostly, I regularly preach – that is, talk about – not judging others, and knew my words meant nothing without my effort to follow through.

So we talked, with me carefully navigating away from any religious topics. It worked; we talked about the car, why he was selling it, what worked and what didn't; it quickly became evident that he really wanted to get rid of the car, almost as much as I wanted to avoid religious talk. I think he also wanted to navigate away from religious conversation, for he knew who I was as well; I wonder if he was asking himself "is it OK to sell a Buick to a Methodist?"). We arranged a test-drive; we negotiated a good price; and the car was ours. And I only had to listen to he and his wife say "praise God" about fifty times.

I know we shouldn't judge; but sometimes it's very hard to help it. Yet it is not judging when we see where words lead or fail to lead; that is simple observation. And I have found that when words lead faith too much, they often don't go very far; sometimes the words are no more than platitudes to make us feel good, or cliquey statements made to impress others, or contrivances to help us fit into a group to which we wish to belong. I was perhaps wrong to judge this couple, but I will never lose my suspicion over the religious language that appears

to have no grounding in Jesus even as his name is being used enthusiastically; I have come to be very cautious with anyone who claims to speak for God who does not live an evidential life of following Jesus.

This brings us to yet another type of hypocrisy, perhaps the most insidious kind – the kind of hypocrisy which attempts to put words or dictates of human design into God's mouth. It is trying to make God say something inconsistent with God's nature, to have God say something that God never does; it attempts to substitute a human virtue for one given by God. Perhaps the most famous example of this is when Warren Buffet made the news by giving a 40 billion dollar gift to charity. This was back in 2006 when he announced his historic pledge to give away the bulk of his fortune to the Gates foundation to be spent on charitable endeavors. All quite admirable, but then in a ceremony at the New York Public Library celebrating the generous gift, Mr. Buffet said, and I quote, "There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way." Perhaps this was tongue and cheek; perhaps he was just having fun; but there is terribly dangerous theology in that simple statement, a theology that tragically many seem to follow. We do not get to heaven by what we give; we get to heaven by the grace of God alone. And that grace is easily replaced by hubris, by being too consumed with ourselves, as those who are excessively rich very often are.

Jesus is giving us the antidote to hypocrisy, and it is obvious: make sure your words and deeds match. Do what you say and say what you do, and keep squarely in mind that doing matters more than saying. This is the simple formula to avoid hypocrisy -- simple but at times extremely hard to do; words tend to come easy, while actions don't. Both are a part of faith's integrity; both are needed to follow Jesus. But both must be consistent with each other; they must reflect each other as life unfolds, one bringing the light of truth to the other and vice versa. Do what you say to make sure you are a creature of truth, that your life bears out a consistency that grows trust. But also say what you do in the sense of explaining what you do, giving testimony to what you do, processing what you do with others, never to draw the limelight to yourself but to help others understand what you do and why you do what you do – and have them join you in helping to discern these things for yourself. Faith needs both testimony and tasks; faith needs to be explained and exercised. There are no shortcuts. In order to boldly live our lives by faith, we must both speak and do what we believe – and encourage others to do the same.