

Sermon

March 1, 2016 | Ash Wednesday
Text: Matthew 6:1–18 | Preacher: Dan Puchalla

All of us in this room are dangerously close to becoming hypocrites this evening. We've come here to mark the beginning of this Lenten fast, and to do so we will soon mark our faces with ashes. What on earth is the matter with us?

Weren't we listening to what Jesus just said in the gospel reading?

Did we not just hear him say, "Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting."

Didn't Jesus just tell us that when we fast we should comb our hair and scrub our faces?

It's the hypocrites who would mark their faces with ashes tonight. And if we will do so right after hearing Jesus tell us otherwise, then don't we add hypocrisy to hypocrisy?

This is a conundrum that has beguiled me on each and every of the last 30-something Ash Wednesdays. Every time my head is dirtied and I hear the words "Remember you are dust" I also hear the voice of Jesus saying "Wash your face."

For want of a theological solution, I have relied solely on a practical one: I wash off my ashes as soon as the service is over so as not to appear a hypocrite.

And there I will be, usually in one of the restrooms down this hall, looking at my slightly reddened forehead, from which I have freshly scrubbed the big black cross hithertofore emblazoned upon it, when I hear another voice.

It's Jesus again. This time he's quoting himself from the gospel of Mark. He's saying, "Anyone who is ashamed of me, the Son of Man will be ashamed of *them* when he comes in the glory of his father and the holy angels."

Ah, jeez. There's no winning with this guy, is there?

So, what shall we do with our dirty faces tonight? Which hypocrisy will we claim? The hypocrisy of being showy about our fasting or the hypocrisy of embarrassedly wiping a sign of our faith from public view?

It's interesting that Jesus uses that word in what he's trying to say about religious practices. *Hypocrites*.

The hypocrites disfigure their face.

The hypocrites blow a trumpet whenever they drop a penny in the red bucket.

The hypocrites pray loudly on street corners and at train stations.

These days, we tend to think of a hypocrite as someone who says one thing and does another, or someone who acts one way in public and another way in private. Hypocrites are duplicitous.

Hypocrites don't practice what they preach.

Hypocrites have two faces.

Hypocrites don't let their left hand know what their right hand is doing—

Oh wait. No. That's what *Jesus* tells us to do. *He* says, don't let let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

And Jesus also says to act one way in public and another way in private.

Give alms in private.

Pray in private.

Fast in private.

Do these things in secret.

Is Jesus telling us to be duplicitous?

Is Jesus telling us to lead a double life?

Is Jesus teaching us how not to be hypocrites ... by being hypocrites?

To see our way through this riddle, perhaps now is a good time to start talking about the theater, because that is what Jesus is literally talking about. In Greek, the word hypocrite simply means an *actor*. (That, incidentally, is why one of Chicago's own most popular theater troupes is called The Hypocrites.)

Now, of course, Jesus isn't besmirching professional actors themselves. He is comparing some of his more odious coreligionists *to* actors in order to, well, in order to insult them.

But what, precisely, *is* his insult? In what way are these persons like actors? The tempting answer would be something like, well, actors pretend to be something they're not. This answer is tempting because this, as I said, is how we understand hypocrisy today, as a doubling of oneself, an appearance different from reality.

Actors make an art of duplicity. And if we were really clever, we would remember that actors in Jesus' world wore masks on stage. They literally showed a different face to the world depending on what character they played, and the same actor would typically play multiple characters because he could put a different mask on for each one. Actors in Jesus' time made an art not just of duplicity but of *multiplicity*. Each actor wielded a myriad of voices and faces.

So is this the insult that Jesus is hurling at these people, these trumpet-blowing, ash-wearing hypocrites of his? Decidedly not. If he were, he would fall into a hypocrisy of his own. Duplicity doesn't seem to be a problem for Jesus, for he recommends each of us to have at least two faces: the one we show to the world and the one we show to God alone.

Rather, I wonder if his insult isn't about multiplicity but about *singularity*. I wonder if the problem with these hypocrites is not that they have multiple faces but that they have constrained themselves to just one. In this case, the only character they will play is that of the pious person.

Let me put it another way. I wonder if Jesus' insult to these folks isn't just to call them actors but to call them *bad* actors.

They are the *parody* of actors,
that caricature of actors who trill their rs and stride about with grand gestures.

They are the kind of actors who take 10 minutes to die on stage.

They are the kind of actors of which Queen Gertrude said, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks."

These hypocrites of Jesus chew the scenery, they pad their lines, they type-cast themselves, and, worst of all, they bury themselves in the part.

They take on the role of a pious person and pursue it single-mindedly, making sure everyone sees that and *only* that part of themselves. It is their unwillingness to be seen as anything *but* that kind of person that, I think, makes them odious to Jesus.

Jesus' insult is didactic because he seemed to know that all of us fall into bad acting. Each of us can find ourselves typecast into the role of the faithful churchgoer, the successful professional, the good daughter, or the perfect father – or, alternatively, we get typecast as the slacker, the screw-up, the criminal. I wonder if Jesus' teaching tonight is about letting ourselves be hypocrites in the sense of being multiple. Because the truth is that all of us are hypocrites, and the only true hypocrisy is to deny that we *are* hypocrites.

Now, what I'm talking about isn't lying or falsehoods or even alternative facts. In fact, realizing we have multiple faces is essential to *not* being false. It's when we constrain ourselves to just one character that we *resort* to falsehoods. If we constrain ourselves to the character of the successful business person, then we're liable to lie when failure inevitably happens.

If we constrain ourselves to the character of the loving spouse, then we're liable to cheat when temptation inevitably happens.

If we constrain ourselves to the character of the good Christian, then we're liable to persecute those who differ from us.

Tonight is about being honest about who each of us really is. And the reality is that none of us is a single, solitary, and unified *I*. As Walt Whitman put it, I contain multitudes.

Each of us is a mess of so many voices and faces, of seemingly conflicting motivations and drives, of divergent beliefs and inconsistent behavior.

Each of us *is* a mess, but it is as such that we were created, a mess of dust and divine breath, is what the bible tells us.

And no surprise we *are* a mess, for our creator is a God of messy metaphysics, a unity of being with three *prosopa*, three faces or masks, is how the old Greek-speaking theologians put it before others came along to tidy God up for the imperial court – but that's a sermon for a different time.

The point is, that if we come here tonight to confess the bad things we have done, we also come here tonight to confess who we are, with all our faces and voices and in all our untidy multiplicity.

As one wise writer has put it, "Confession replaces a *status* mind-set with a *becoming* mind-set, a way of thinking that proves much less susceptible to self-delusion and self-limitation."*

It is by virtue of our multiplicity that we are not perfect but we are perfectible. It is our multiplicity, our changeability, our messiness that makes it possible for us to sin, but it is also what makes it possible for us to repent, to change our ways, to grow and mature into the full stature of Christ.

Therefore, let us start this Lenten journey by letting our messy Maker see our messy faces, stained with hypocrisy and scrubbed with shame. And our Maker, who sees us in our messiness, will reward us with the fullness of life.

Amen.

*Brian McClaren, *Naked Spirituality*, 98.