

## **“The Horrors of Hypocrisy”**

Proverbs 12:13, 17-22; Matthew 23:23-31 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – October 31, 2021

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might boldly commit ourselves to truth, trusting in your mercy and faithfulness. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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A few months ago at choir practice, when we shifted things around such that there was an empty spot on this Sunday, I suggested to Deborah that we could sing “Dead Men’s Bones,” since it would be Halloween. It’s a fun song to sing, and what better day to do it? It’s not every year Halloween falls on a Sunday. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that it probably shouldn’t be performed in a vacuum. You can’t just throw a song about bones and graves and whatnot out there without any context. So here we go!

Now those of you who’ve heard me complain about bringing secular holidays into Christian worship may be a little confused, so here’s some clarification: The anthem the choir did this morning quotes more scripture than most of what we sing. It’s taken directly from the verses we just read from Matthew 23. And if we study our history carefully, we will be reminded that Halloween – or All Hallows’ Eve as we might call it – while thoroughly commercialized at this point in history, has its roots in Christian tradition. Next Sunday, we will celebrate All Saints Day, when the church remembers and lifts up the names of our beloved ones who have passed on. All Hallows Eve is the night before when we get all the shivers out of our system.

Honestly, I'm not the biggest fan of Halloween, but I will admit that I think it's a highly cathartic holiday. Halloween gives us permission to bring things that are often hidden or taboo out into the open. It gives us a safe space to explore our fears. In a sense, it's a holiday deeply rooted in faith in God, because it invites us to welcome death into our midst and make a mockery of it.

So back to those "dead men's bones." The horrifying thing the anthem is warning us about is not, of course, death, but hypocrisy. The dead men's bones and the "whitewashed tombs full of all kinds of filth" in the scripture and in the anthem are not horrifying in and of themselves, but because they are serving as metaphors for the horrors of hypocrisy. By certain measures, hypocrisy seems to be the sin Jesus is most disgusted by, especially when it's coming from people who have the authority or power to influence others. Bizarrely, as much as we throw around the word "hypocrite," we don't actually talk about hypocrisy in detail very much. It's another hidden thing Halloween invites to bring out into the open.

Before we get too far in there, let's clarify something important: When these verses in Matthew say "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" – which they do, a lot – the most important word there for us is "hypocrites." The "scribes and Pharisees" bit is a reflection of a very particular conflict between a longstanding faith tradition and a portion of that same faith tradition that was beginning to separate itself into something distinct. This is not a license to accuse our Jewish cousins of deeper levels of hypocrisy or legalism or any other bad thing than we ourselves should be

confessing. It is not an excuse for continuing the long, shameful practice of Christian anti-Semitism. It is not an invitation, even, to use the word “Pharisee” as a synonym for “hypocrite.” Nothing in the teaching of Jesus suggests that we should spend more time looking for sinfulness in others than we do discerning it in our own hearts. Indeed, these verses about hypocrisy should teach us the exact opposite.

Rather than using cheap and easy short-cuts by assigning the role of hypocrites to the “Pharisees,” we would do well to hear the criticism of those outside the church who seem to have the impression that churches are full of hypocrites. Unpacking that assumption can help us identify more clearly what hypocrisy even is. The short version is when we say one thing and do something else. But it’s more than that, right? There is an implication that the thing we’re saying involves righteousness, good behavior, virtuous living, while the thing we’re doing (presumably somewhat secretly) is the opposite: sinful, bad, and harmful. So it’s not that hard to understand why people might see churches as full of hypocrites. Part of what we do when we gather here is talk about what it means to live virtuously. But all of us fail to live up to the standards of righteousness the gospel calls us to.

The thing that gets lost in this assumption – and it’s possible it’s because we don’t say this part out loud enough – is that in order for that virtue/sin disconnect to qualify as hypocrisy, we would need to be pretending it wasn’t there. Hypocrisy is when you pretend that you’re good while actually being bad. How do we avoid falling into hypocrisy? By openly confessing our failures and sins, and admitting that the

standards of love and compassion that we aspire to live by are often beyond our reach. By acknowledging that the very reason we gather as church is to help each other get better at living up to those standards. By offering humble apologies when necessary and making amends when we hurt others.

One of the roots of hypocrisy is dishonesty. It involves lying, not just to others, but often, to ourselves. When we pretend to be other than we are, better than we are, our souls are hollowed out from the effort of maintaining the pretense. “The truth will set you free,” Jesus said, but sometimes we’re too afraid of being found out to believe him. What we don’t realize is that we’re rarely as good at pretending to be virtuous as we realize. People can tell when what we proclaim about our lives doesn’t match up with how we live our lives. Humanity has long known that “actions speak louder than words.” Somehow we’re all tempted to believe we’re the exception to this rule.

Another root of hypocrisy is narcissism. It takes over our hearts when we become more concerned with how others see us than we are about actually behaving in ways that contribute to the common good. Jesus told the hypocrites of his day that they were majoring in the minors – worrying more about the details of tithing herbs than they were about what really matters: justice, mercy, and faith. When we’re obsessed with presenting an image of virtue, we’ve put the focus on ourselves rather than on doing good.

So if dishonesty and narcissism are tangled in the roots of hypocrisy, what tools do we have to resist it? I would suggest the powers of listening and community. If we ignore the feedback others are giving us, our self-presentation can easily fall into self-deception. Listening to others with care – especially those whose lives our actions may have impacted negatively, without defensiveness or fear – can help us assess, confess, and re-direct our actions more faithfully. If we stay grounded in community, it's easier to embrace the goals of the whole, rather than being consumed with what others think about us. I might argue that it's impossible to practice justice, mercy, and faith as individuals. These concepts only come alive in our interactions with others. Community is how we do that.

Throughout all of this – this resistance to hypocrisy – there must be a constant thread of humility. Humility is the antidote to self-deception. The great gift of our faith is that we are promised that our sinfulness is not the end of the road. On the other side of confession and repentance, restoration and wholeness await. Perhaps hypocrisy is the greatest affront to God because it is a rejection of God's mercy. We have no need to pretend to be better than we are, because God forgives us for the ways we fail to live up to what we're trying to be. We don't need to shove those skeletons into closets with nicely decorated doors. We don't have to be afraid. We don't have to hide. The truth will set us free. Hallelujah and Amen!