

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Aug 23rd 2014

When I first read today's readings I recalled the prior dialogue in Chapter 7, where Jesus admonished us to not judge, and to not be concerned about the splinter in our brother's eye when we had a wooden beam in our own. Today's teaching on hypocrisy is in the same vein – don't fall into the trap of telling others what to do and then not doing it yourself. Don't be so enamored with yourself that you fail to see your flaws. Don't do things to be seen, but because they need to be done. The essence of hypocrisy is just that – to say one thing and do another.

And it is important not to forget this hypocritical leaning that we all have as part of our human condition. One can certainly see countless examples of hypocrisy in our daily lives, from politicians to entertainers to business leaders and even to religious leaders. For me though, when I synthesize Chapters 7 and 23, a key teaching is not just to notice the hypocrisy in others, but to more importantly know it in ourselves. I think it is easy to get caught up in finding hypocrisy only in public figures or work colleagues or neighbors and forget that in our own private lives we too are many times guilty of hypocrisy. And like the splinter and beam analogy, when we look at someone else it might be easy to see their flaw but then when we look at ourselves we cannot come to terms with our own shortcoming.

It seems like our personal hypocrisy can be more insidious precisely because it is hard to see. When we don't acknowledge it, we create patterns and habits of hypocritical behavior (when our actions are inconsistent with our professed beliefs) that become so entwined in our lives that it takes significant effort and reflection for us to even recognize that we have been hypocritical, that we have failed to live up to our own best purposes. We adapt and customize and sanitize our beliefs to meet our behavior, rather than change our actions because they fail to meet our core truths. We don't just act hypocritically, but actually change into someone other than who we started out to be.

It also struck me that we might more easily see our possible hypocrisy in little things (“Gee, I should have been nicer to that grocery checkout clerk – it wasn't her fault the product was mis-priced or that I was having a bad day.”) but fail to see it in big things (e.g., what types of public response should we have to marginalized people within and outside our borders). I suppose that being aware of our possible hypocrisy is the first step to not acting hypocritically. But that awareness takes effort and, if we have over time built up habits of acting inconsistently with our values, a difficult catharsis to make changes.

I think we have to deal with this on two levels – what have we done in the past that is inconsistent with our beliefs and what are we doing currently (or what might we be doing soon) that would be inconsistent. Recognizing our failure to be faithful in the past is the first step, and resolving to not be inconsistent in the present and future is the next step. We can change. Recognizing that we have been

hypocrites in the past does not condemn us to be hypocrites in the future.

Ultimately, we can reduce our potential for hypocrisy by being mindful that our actions match our words. We can avoid being a hypocrite by being aware in the moment of doing that we are acting as we think God calls us to act.

And so my prayer today is for the grace to be more aware of my tendency to be hypocritical and for the grace to act consistently with my beliefs.

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