

Keeping Up Appearances

A sermon based on Matthew 23:1-12

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Some of you may be familiar with the British television comedy, "Keeping up Appearances". The main character of this show is so obsessed with etiquette and breeding that she makes life unbearable for her long-suffering husband. Her name is Hyacinth Bucket, though she insists that the surname be pronounced Bouquet.

The insufferable Hyacinth is forever putting on airs, and might convince a few strangers of her high breeding if only her family and neighbours proved cooperative. Unfortunately, her sister's husband is a slob, her lecherous father is a drunk, her niece is a tramp, and together with other likeable characters they manage, weekly if unintentionally, to demolish Hyacinth's hard-won facade. Whether it's the new vicar coming over for tea, or Hyacinth trying to orchestrate the presence of her neighbours when a new suite--the exact replica of one in Sandringham House--is delivered to her door, her family and neighbours prove to be beyond orchestration, and Hyacinth's well-laid plans go awry. Even when others prove cooperative, Hyacinth often sabotages herself by going over the top in her need to convince others of her high social standing.

Many of us enjoy watching imposters receive their comeuppance, and in a television show that reaps its comedy from this premise, the contrast between "appearances" and reality is, of course, all too obvious! The contrast is often less marked in real life. All the same, we enjoy someone of high social standing being reintroduced to the concept of humility. When George Bush was President, he visited a nursing home, and taking the hand of an elderly man walking the halls, President Bush asked him, "Sir, do you know who I am?" To which the man replied, "No, but if you ask the nurses, they can tell you."

Even when someone's pride is only slightly inflated, we still enjoy his or her fall from grace. A pastor who had often visited a man in a nursing home was asked to do the man's funeral when he died. The man had been a mover and shaker in town, a captain of local industry, and the pastor was nervous about the funeral because he knew the church would be packed with dignitaries.

The service went well, however, and on the way to the cemetery the pastor began turning to 1 Corinthians 15, the Bible passage he planned to read at the graveside. He was interrupted by the funeral director, who complimented him on his funeral meditation. He asked the pastor several questions, and, says the pastor, "I answered each one. I was proud of myself and the job I had done. Here was a man who had listened to hundreds of funeral services, and he singled out mine as being one of the best." When they arrived at the graveside, the pastor, still basking in the afterglow of affirmation, stepped to the head of the casket--family, friends and dignitaries surrounding him--and asked them to listen to the words of Scripture. Then, he read, in his most dignified voice, 1 Corinthians 5: "It is reported commonly that there are fornicators among you!" (Michael Hartwig, Valparaiso, Indiana)

Another pastor, a Reverend Twiddle, received a letter from his alma mater informing him that he was to receive an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree. He was overjoyed about it

until he realized, as he told a friend, "It's bad enough when they call me Reverend Twiddle, but I don't think I'm up to being called Reverend Twiddle, D.D."

Keeping up Pharisaic Appearances

It's not always easy to keep up appearances, but there are Hyacinth Bouquets in every generation and culture. Jesus wasn't beyond pointing out the Hyacinths of his day to his disciples, only in his day they were called Pharisees. Their inconsistencies were only too apparent, and Jesus instructed his disciples, "Do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 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. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces...." (Matthew 23:3-7)

Now, this text has become a problem for modern-day commentators, who warn of its propensity to fuel anti-Semitism, and no doubt there is that danger. If you read this passage carelessly and out of context, you could possibly take these words as a condemnation of Jews and Judaism. Some commentators describe Jesus' observations as a "diatribe" against the scribes and Pharisees. Nonsense! I read Jesus' comments as an understated observation of what was already evident to many people. A diatribe was hardly needed to point out the blatant contradiction between the appearance the Pharisees wished to project, and what they actually produced! Some commentators warn that Jesus' message is directed at us, not at others. Hogwash! It was aimed right at the Pharisees! There very well may be implications for our own Pharisaic inclinations, but his words had a very specific target.

Indeed, the Pharisees themselves were well aware of the gap between their image and their behaviour. The Talmud distinguishes seven different kinds of Pharisee, no doubt in the interests of encouraging authenticity of belief and behaviour. The first was called the "Shoulder Pharisee", a Pharisee very meticulous in his observance of the Law, only he wore his good deeds upon his shoulder. He was more concerned with projecting a reputation for purity and goodness than with purity and goodness itself. He obeyed the Law, but like some of our political leaders, he considered it important not only to do something, but to be seen to be doing it! (Cited in William Barclay's commentary of Gospel of Matthew)

The second type of Pharisee named by the Talmud is the "Wait-a-little Pharisee". Such a Pharisee could produce an entirely valid excuse for putting off a good deed. He professed the creed of the strictest Pharisees, but could always find an excuse for allowing his practice to lag behind his profession.

A third type is the "Bruised or Bleeding Pharisee". The Talmud speaks of the plague of self-afflicting Pharisees, those Pharisees who took literal obedience over the top. For example, no strict orthodox teacher was to be seen talking to a woman in public, even if that woman was his own wife or sister. The "Bruised Pharisees" took this a step further, and, wanting to avoid looking at any woman on the street, they shut their eyes, consequently bumping into walls and buildings and bruising themselves. Hardly deterred by such foolishness, they wore these bruises with pride, for they considered that the bruises advanced their pious reputation.

A fourth type named by the Talmud is the "Pestle and Mortar Pharisee," Pharisees who walked in such ostentatious humility that they were bent like a pestle in a mortar.

A fifth type is called the "Ever-reckoning Pharisee," the Pharisee who was forever tallying up his good deeds, taking an accountant's approach to faith and managing to reduce a relationship with God to a balance sheet!

Yet another type named is the "Fearful Pharisee," who forever lived in dread of divine punishment. He saw religion in terms of judgment, and life in terms of a terror-stricken evasion of judgment.

And finally, the Talmud concludes its list with the "God-fearing Pharisee," the Pharisee who really and truly loves God and finds his delight in obedience to the Law of God, however difficult it might be to fulfill.

The truth is that Pharisaism began as a renewal movement within Judaism. It was about 175 B.C. when Antiochus Epiphanes of Syria made a deliberate attempt to stamp out the Jewish religion and to introduce Greek religion and Greek customs and practices. Fearing that Judaism would be swamped by this flood of Hellenistic propaganda, the Pharisees emerged as a separate sect--indeed, their name means "The Separated Ones"--whose members dedicated their lives to the careful and meticulous observance of every rule and regulation put forth by the Scribes. They determined to carefully observe their faith in its most elaborate ceremonial and legal form in order to resist this Hellenistic threat to their faith and existence. A noble objective, I would say, only with time their pursuit became a rather abstract one, with little application to the average believer's daily life. In time, the integrity of the movement was lost, form became more important than substance, and what remained were volumes of instruction without authentic, Godly instructors to lend some vitality and credence to it.

Guidelines for Appraising Leaders

There is no doubt that Jesus' words, like the words of the Talmud itself, were aimed at the Pharisees and the rift between their words and their deeds. Jesus stood in the tradition of Israelite prophets, who had no hesitation in confronting hypocrisy. The Old Testament prophet, Micah, for example, warns against false prophets who lead people astray, prophets who out of self-interest "...cry 'Peace' when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths." (Micah 3:5) Micah rails against those who "abhor justice and pervert all equity" (3:9); against "rulers (who) give judgment for a bribe" (3:11); against "priests (who) teach for a price" (3:11); and against "prophets (who) give oracles for money...." (3:11).

Some commentators complain that Matthew had an axe to grind with the synagogue community of his own time. That may be, given that his vision of community was different from the prevailing one which made much of titles, position, and hierarchy. Matthew's primary audience, however, was the young Christian community, and he included Jesus' satire of the Pharisees in order to encourage members of the Christian community to live authentic Christian lives, and to encourage their leaders to exercise authentic leadership.

Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is a well-known chunk of Jesus' teaching at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, but less known to us are the contents and concerns contained in Jesus' last great public discourse, which Matthew records in chapters

23 to 25. It's a discourse that warns against ostentatious displays of public piety, but it also encourages genuine discipleship, and if we were to massage our text into a few positive guidelines for Christian leadership, they might run something like this:

1. Respect tradition. The Pharisees, Jesus says, "sit on Moses' seat; therefore," he continues, "do whatever they teach you and follow it...." (Matthew 23:2-3). The Pharisees may not be the best example of their tradition, but the tradition is solid. Jesus' ongoing conflict with the Scribes and Pharisees had nothing to do with their skill in interpreting Scripture or with their articles of faith. Rather, it was their pompous claim to virtue. Jesus clearly acknowledges that the Torah, spoken with Mosaic authority, shall continue to guide the thoughts and actions of Christian disciples.
2. Recognize the humanity of teachers and leaders; and teachers and leaders, recognize your own humanity. Don't let this keep you from aspiring to excellence, but be careful, lest your aspirations lead you into pretence. In other words, practise what you preach!
3. Recognize that you're still a few courses short of graduation! Jesus is very pointed about those who wish to exercise leadership on the basis of their titles and credentials; he reminds us that we are students, that we "are all students," and that we have but "one instructor". (23:8 and 10)
4. Remember your raison d'être. Never lose sight of your reason for being, which Jesus outlines in verse 11, "The greatest among you will be your servant." It's the same reason Jesus came among us, "...not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:28) If that isn't compelling enough reason to take a humble approach to others, Jesus adds that in the eternal scheme of things "all who exalt themselves will be humbled" whereas "all who humble themselves will be exalted." (23:12)

Our Own Inconsistencies and Contradictions

If these guidelines are helpful in appraising leaders, they are just as helpful in appraising ourselves, for we too have our share of inconsistencies and contradictions. We are not always what we appear. Most of us have created a public persona that does not necessarily reveal all of our private peccadillos. Our contradictions may not be as public as those of Hyacinth Bouquet or the New Testament Pharisees, and we may tend to dismiss our own inconsistencies as evidence of a complex personality, but few of us are unaware of the gaps between that to which we ascribe and that which we deliver.

Now, I'm not fully of the persuasion, as our culture and modern media seem to be, that chronicling every prominent person's fall from grace is necessary. Even the mainstream media thrives on the carrion feed, tut-tutting while reporting on the frenzied feed of the tabloids, not seeming to realize its own hypocrisy in simply laundering the same stories. ("Mainstream media rip off tabloids," by William Powers, *The New Republic*, reprinted in the *Ottawa Citizen*, June 11, 1997)

Pointing out the failings of leaders and heroes seems, in and of itself, an insufficient reason for being. I also don't necessarily have a problem with the fact that few of us are without inconsistencies and contradictions. For one thing, there isn't one of us that isn't still a few courses short of graduation! For another thing, there's hardly a biblical hero or

heroine that didn't have clay feet of one size or another; their flaws are seldom hidden from us. The same pertains to the saints of the Church, who weren't altogether saintly. The venerated St. Augustine, whose theology is studied in every reputable seminary in the world, was hardly a paragon of exemplary living. St. Francis of Assisi, the most loved of all saints, was the son of a wealthy family whose exploits, in his early days, were so infamous that he was looked upon as a vacuous, rich, spoiled brat! The saints of our faith wrestled with anger, with obstinacy, with jealousy and a host of other un-saintly things, as did the reformers of the 16th century, many of whom could have benefited from a little more personal reformation.

Few of us enjoy the gift of being completely without guile. Few of us are what we appear to be, and so Jesus' perspective on authentic Christian living remains a challenge to us. We all have contradictions, heroes and saints included, but when the contrast between appearance and reality becomes too great, it leads to what I believe is called cognitive dissonance, and one's psychic health is in peril. One's soul is in peril.

Now, a simpleton's approach to inner harmony is to water down his or her profession in order to bring it into line with his or her behaviour, and that's fine, if you're satisfied living out your life based solely on some vague notion of honesty. A more courageous approach toward authenticity is to continue to aspire toward one's ideals, all the while remaining humble about one's shortcomings.

I am thankful for the keen sense of hypocrisy that our Christian tradition has bequeathed us. It helps us to be alert to, and with God's grace to avoid, the ever-present danger of inflating our words, while shortchanging our deeds. Some years ago the Ottawa Citizen (January 12, 1992) carried a shabby little piece insisting that attending church only occasionally was not hypocritical. I agree. It may betray a shallow grasp of faith; it may reveal a fear of commitment; it may be indicative of our culture's blithe dismissal of anything that requires personal sacrifice, but it's hardly hypocrisy! It doesn't even begin to measure up to the authentic, gut-wrenching, guilt-drenched fear of hypocrisy our tradition has given us--a tradition that, while demanding much of us, has little patience with grandstanding, "holier-than-thou," super-spiritual fools whose walk simply doesn't match their talk.

Luther: It Is Well With My Soul

Almost five hundred years ago, on this very day--on the eve of All Saints' Day (October 31, 1517)--a young priest by the name of Martin Luther posted on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, a list of 95 theses and requested a meeting of the church leaders to discuss the substance of these statements. He had no idea at the time the momentous changes this would set in motion.

Luther's public act began a chain reaction that resulted in great upheaval, and renewal, in the Church, but what happened on that day 482 years ago was the culmination of a long, personal struggle within Luther's soul and spirit. Like the "Fearful Pharisee" described in the Talmud, Luther too lived in dread of divine punishment. He saw God as an angry, vindictive God, a God of wrath and punishment who watched over us all, just waiting for us to make a mistake so that He could mete out the punishment we deserved!

Spending all of eternity suffering in hell did not appeal to Luther, so he set out to make himself pleasing to God. He left a promising future in law school, and took on the

disciplines of an Augustinian monk. Ordained a priest, he later earned his Ph.D. in Bible and Theology, and eventually became a professor at the University of Wittenberg, one of the new and upcoming centres of higher learning. Indeed, Luther accumulated enough titles and credentials to satisfy a host of angry gods. A sense of inner peace, however, continued to evade him. His own contradictions and shortcomings loomed large before him, causing him to long for and to do all he could do to obtain peace with God--to acquire a sense of assurance and rest for his troubled spirit.

Luther tried his utmost to be a good and obedient believer. He strived hard to do everything that a Christian was supposed to do. He spent hours on his knees in prayer on a hard stone floor. He beat himself with a whip. He spent the night out in the cold snow, thinking that this would show God how sorry he was for his sins, and would somehow make amends for his sins. At other times he spent hours in confession, driving his confessor crazy, going over his life with a fine-tooth comb, trying to remember and confess every sin that could possibly be offensive to God so that he could then do proper penance.

It's not as if Luther couldn't cope. During this time of personal struggle, Luther was developing quite a reputation for himself as one of the budding stars of the Church. He was an intelligent and gifted person, highly regarded and respected, yet before God he felt like an imposter--a sinner.

Then one day, as Luther was preparing for a series of lectures on Paul's letter to the Romans, he was reading and studying Romans, chapter 3, a portion of Scripture he had read many times before but this time as he read it a light came on! As Luther describes it, "It was as though the gates of heaven were opened to me!" Romans, chapter 3, told him that though all of us fall short of the glory of God, God's grace is sufficient to make up for our flaws. No longer was there a need to keep up appearances, even before God! No longer was the assurance that God loved him beyond his grasp. Set free from trying to make himself worthy and acceptable before God, Luther could rest in the grace and favour and love of God.

I pray that each of us, in our individual quest for authenticity, may be able to narrow the gap between what we are and what we, with God's grace, can be, but I also pray that, however much we feel that we fall short of our ideals, we will leave here this morning with the knowledge and assurance and certainty that God loves each one of us.

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Give us, O Lord, a steadfast heart,
which no unworthy affection may drag downward;
Give us an unconquered heart,
which no tribulation can wear out;
Give us an upright heart,
which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside.
(St. Thomas Aquinas)