

Ash Wednesday: Isaiah 58:1-12, Ps 51:1-17, Matt 6:1-6, 16-21  
Preached at Custer Lutheran Fellowship on 2-6-2008 by Pastor David Van Kley

## **Don't Be Like the Hypocrites!**

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares: "Do not be like the **hypocrites**." But what **is** a hypocrite? We think: a man who says one thing and does another. A woman who criticizes people for doing something she is guilty of. A preacher in bed with a prostitute. An accountant who cooks the books. A lawyer who breaks the law. A crooked cop.

But Jesus meant something else by this word. In the Roman world, "hypocrite" referred to an **actor**. An actor plays a role. An actor tries to convince you that he or she is someone else, to make you forget that she is actually Julia Roberts, he is really Tom Hanks. For Jesus, a hypocrite was a person who puts on a show, whose actions are for the sake of appearances.

Of course, we do that all the time. We do it when we suck in our stomachs on the beach. Or put on make-up before a date. Or nod as if we understand what someone is saying when actually we don't have a clue. Have you ever done that?

Arlene and I aren't the best housekeepers in the world. But when someone is coming to visit, you should see the cleaning frenzy! That's because we want people to think we're different than we really are. We don't want them to know that our lives are messy!

I remember the high school baseball game in which I knocked the ball out of the catcher's mitt trying to score. I barreled into that catcher like a linebacker and the ball rolled free. I got up and pumped my fist at the stands, even though I knew I hadn't touched the plate. Unfortunately, the catcher knew it too: he got up and tagged me. The umpire knew it: "You're out," he bellowed. But even then I acted as if I'd been robbed, pointing to the plate, arguing that I'd dragged my foot across it. What a hypocrite!

Of course, that was only a ball game. People often act in more destructive ways. They sometimes give alms, Jesus said, so that others will see and be impressed. So, when I get a year-end flyer from Lutherans Outdoors or LSS that lists the names of the donors, I inevitably run my finger down the list until I find our names. Why? Because it makes me feel good about myself? Because I want people to think that I am generous?

In today's Old Testament, Isaiah accuses the people of Israel of going through the motions of religion, acting a part by fasting and confessing their sins in sackcloth and ashes, while failing to do any of things God really cares about like feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, overcoming injustice. How much different are we? We write small checks to world hunger while supporting political and social systems that keep us in positions of privilege. We pray for the homeless while living in homes with two or three spare bedrooms. Are we **play-acting** tonight when we wear a visible cross of ash on our foreheads, yet do not take up the invisible cross of baptism, the cross of **Jesus**, by

giving ourselves away quietly for the sake of the world?

“The Father sees in secret,” Jesus says. God doesn’t look at appearances, but on the heart. God knows our motives tonight, knows who we’re trying to impress.

Perhaps that’s why we’ve come. Because **we** know that **God** knows. Because we’re tired of pretending to be what we are not. Perhaps we’ve come baring our hearts as well as our foreheads. If so, it is to us that God says, “a broken and contrite heart I will not despise.”

Verna Mae Benton is waiting to have heart surgery: the surgeon will replace her old, leaky valve with something new. He will carefully work over her for four hours, giving her a new lease on life, so that blood can flow through her body once more.

Tonight, we come to the altar to undergo heart surgery of a different kind. “Create in me a clean heart,” we cry, “and renew a right spirit within me!”

For Christians, the story **is** the surgery. God came into the world not as an actor, but as a real human being who loves us. Good Friday was not a passion play, but a real and painful death for our sake. Because of the cross, there is no point in trying to **look** good; through Christ, God lays aside our sin and reckons us **as** good. The cross becomes for us the heart valve of forgiveness through which the blood of compassion and the hunger for justice flow. We don’t just wear it for people to see; we live through it.

Create in us clean hearts, O God, and renew in us right spirits!

Have you ever noticed that when we say, “so and so has a good heart,” we really mean that she or he is a compassionate person? A person with a good heart is someone who will give you her last penny, who will give you the shirt off his back. Even when nobody else sees. **Especially** when nobody else sees.

We all know people like this. I remember David, a man I knew in another place, who had many faults, one of which was that he didn’t go to church very often. But he had a good heart. I mean, if you needed somebody to pull you out of a snowbank, well, it didn’t matter what time of day it was. And if you couldn’t pay for repairs on your car, well, he’d eat the cost. Nobody would know it, except for the person who received the gift. And God, who sees in secret. Sometimes, **this** David longs to be like **that** David!

I guess it was Mark Twain who once said that we should “dance like nobody’s watching, love like you’ve never been hurt, sing like nobody’s listening, and live like it’s heaven on earth.” Mark Twain may have said it, but it is Jesus Christ who makes it possible. Amen.