

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 6

Go through the motions. Fake it until you make it. This is not terrible advice. In fact, it is advice I have followed and given at times. Because one way we learn is by trying, by learning in action, learning on the job, by practicing, growing into it gradually. And so, we sometimes begin by doing what we think is the right thing, sometimes imitate someone else until we get the feel for it ourselves, until we find our own style, rhythm, skill, approach.

When I was started Clinical Pastoral Education which involved serving as a Chaplain in the hospital, our supervisor offered a similar piece of advice. She said that when we go into a hospital room and face a situation that we have never faced before and are not sure what to say or do, to think of a mentor or example that we respect or admire. To think of what they would say and do, and say or do that. And eventually, you will find your own voice and responses. It was a stepping stone, not an end in itself.

Fake it until you make it, because sometimes the outward physical motion helps the inward find its way, to learn as one goes, and hopefully the inward and outward start to act in tandem, in cooperation, as one. It is a crude paraphrase of Aristotle's notion that the first step to becoming virtuous is to act virtuous.

But what happens when the outward actions do not meld with the inner, what happens when the outer behavior is not merged with nor in tandem with the heart? What happens when the inner desire or motivation grows apart, no longer undergirds the actions? What happens when we are hiding behind an outward appearance, or have come to assume the physical behavior is what matters, not the inner spiritual?

Jesus uses the word hypocrite. The word hypocrite connotes someone who says or teaches one thing, but at least some of their actions or behaviors are contradictory to what they profess. There is a disconnect between what one says and what one does, between certain behaviors, between their heart and the image they try to put forth.

The roots of the word, however, come from the Greek theater, from the word *hypokrites*, which means "an actor" or "a stage player." It is someone who literally

puts on a stage mask, who takes on a persona on the stage that is different from who they truly are. It is an act, a momentary putting on of a persona, it is performance. Jesus is criticizing the religious, the pious, those who are public examples of the faith, suggesting that they are like actors, putting on a persona that is not in keeping with their hearts and motives, or that, at least, there is a needed corrective, a needed focus on the inward.

These sayings come in the sermon on the mount where Jesus is reinterpreting the tradition, where he is extrapolating on the implications of the law, on a fuller realization of what God intended through the Torah. Where Jesus is internalizing the law to include motives, and attitudes, and the stuff of one's heart. And what he seems to be saying, the advice he seems to be giving is this: if your outward actions have not brought along the heart, then change the outward actions, re-evaluate your practices. Change up your practices, so that the heart is deepened, the motives purified, the spirit more in-line-with the God we serve and seek.

“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Change the physical actions so that it becomes less about praise and recognition of others, and more about your own connection and relationship to the Lord.

In a section we didn't read, Jesus says:

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others.”

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Change the physical actions so as to return prayer to a relational action between you and God, not one that may earn you honor or respect before others.

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting.”

“But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

It is not that outward actions and good deeds and courteous behavior are not called for or appropriate, but Jesus is pushing us towards a fuller realization of the law, of what God desires for us as a people living in covenant with God. It is to bring the heart along, to deepen the heart, to nurture the spirit, to purify our motives, to fake it only with the intent to make it, to act virtuous in effort to become virtuous, to act pious only in effort to nurture a spiritual fervor. To fulfill the instructions of the law in outward ways, with the intention of refining and purifying our hearts, our motives, our spirits, that we might truly come to love the lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

It is not that outward deeds or customs, or public worship are inherently bad. The key is changing the rhythms as needed in order to bring our hearts and our actions back in line, to bring ourselves back into personal conversation and relationship with the Lord that we worship.

And so, if the heart has not come along yet, or if there is a disconnect between our actions and our motives, between our behavior and our hearts, then change up your rhythms with the intention of working on your heart, or realigning our religious behaviors to be about the most important thing, our relationship with God, our connection to our savior, our love of the Lord. This is the first and greatest commandment leading to the second which is to love one another as we do ourselves.

In this season of lent, we might do as Jesus suggests. Change up our rhythms and actions and behaviors, not as ends in themselves, not as pious actions that earn us points, not because those patterns or behaviors are inherently better than others, but as endeavors to nurture our hearts, to be reminded of internal aspects, the relational reality of our faith, to bring our inward hearts and our outward behaviors in line once again, so that they work in tandem once again, so that we might find that personal place where the mask falls off, and it is no longer needed.

So let us be marked
not for sorrow.
And let us be marked
not for shame.
Let us be marked
not for false humility
or for thinking
we are less

than we are
but for claiming
what God can do
within the dust,
within the dirt,
within the stuff
of which the world
is made,