



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

September 9, 2012

"It's What's Inside That Counts" - Luke 11:37-46
The Rev. Dr. David Stoker

What picture comes to your mind when I say the name, "Jesus"? What is your image of Jesus? Maybe He's sitting under a tree in a white toga, with flowing brown hair and beard, birds flying around Him, children in His arms, a smile on His face. Perhaps you think of the beatitudes and Jesus teaching. Or the way Jesus wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus. Maybe you think of Him as the Good Shepherd who cares for His lost, hurting sheep.

I'll bet you don't often think of Him as angry. As someone who—if you invited Him into your home—would insult you and your friends. And yet that is exactly what happens in our scripture lesson this morning, Luke 11:37-46.

When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him; so he went in and reclined at the table. But the Pharisee was surprised when he noticed that Jesus did not first wash before the meal. Then the Lord said to him, "Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? But now as for what is inside you—be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.

"Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint,

and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone. "Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplaces. "Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which people walk over without knowing it."

One of the experts in the law answered him, "Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also." Jesus replied, "And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them."

There are very few people who never, ever get angry. Even if you are the most mild mannered person, you most likely have a hot button—that if someone knows how to push it, they can really make your blood boil.

What makes you angry? Maybe it's when somebody cuts you off on the freeway. Maybe it's when your sister borrows some of your clothes and doesn't tell you about it. Maybe it's when your favorite college football team loses because the coach didn't call the right play. Maybe it's when you see injustice happening and innocent people being hurt.

Even the Lord Jesus had a hot button. There were some things that really got Him going. One thing that made Jesus angry was the hypocrisy—the masks—that the Pharisees wore. Hypocrisy, wearing masks, was a big deal to Jesus.

Years ago when I was a student at Princeton Seminary in NJ, my preaching professor was Dr. Donald Macleod. Dr. Macleod taught the importance of choosing a compelling sermon title. He would tell of Mrs. O'Riley who would get on the Fifth Avenue bus on Sunday morning in Manhattan and pass by the great churches. As the bus would approach each church, she would read the sign with the sermon title and decide whether to get off the bus and attend that church.

Dr. Macleod always said, "Pick a title that will make Mrs. O'Riley get off the bus." Mindful of that instruction, one of my fellow students got up in class. He began his sermon by announcing the title. He said: "The title of my sermon is: 'There's a Bomb on the Bus.' I don't know what grade Dr. MacLeod gave him for that sermon, but I have never forgotten his shocking title.

Jesus said some really, hard shocking comments to the Pharisees. We want to try and understand why, and what its application would mean to us.

Now first, who were the Pharisees? The Pharisees were a group of Jewish scholars who were experts in the Law of Moses. In some ways they were the best people in the land. Following God's commands was the focus of their lives. Nothing wrong with that. But somewhere along the way, the Pharisees seemed to miss the point. In their desire to obey God's laws, they begin piling on more and more rules. Soon, the Pharisees had compiled more than 50 volumes of rules that a Jew had to follow to be considered righteous.

They particularly had rules about how the Sabbath should be observed. But the Pharisees had lost sight of the essence of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was given by God to give people refreshment, rather than to add to their burdens. There is a time where each of us need to stop working and experience some recreation, so that we can be "recreated".

But the Pharisees twisted the rules of the Sabbath around so that the Sabbath became a burden. They made a bit deal about determining if a person was working on the Sabbath day. If you were carrying something, that was considered work. So they went so far as to decide if a woman's hair clip was worn, or carried. If carried, then it would be a burden and forbidden on the Sabbath.

You had to wear soft shoes on the Sabbath. No shoes with cobbler's nails because in the Pharisees' view, the addition of the nails meant they were carrying an unnecessary burden. They taught that if a house caught on fire on the Sabbath, its inhabitants couldn't carry their clothes out of the house to spare them from the flames, because that would be bearing a burden. However, they were allowed to put on all the layers of

clothing they could wear, and thus remove the clothes by wearing them, which was acceptable.

Women were forbidden to look into a mirror on the Sabbath because they might see a gray hair and pull it out, and that would constitute work. Even walking through grass was not allowed because some of the grass might be bent and broken, which constituted threshing which was one of the forbidden categories of work.

This was the kind of religious atmosphere Jesus entered into when He came to eat dinner in the home of the Pharisees. But Jesus did something very unusual that day. He didn't wash His hands before beginning the meal. The host was amazed that Jesus didn't wash His hands before eating. But that didn't mean the same thing to him that it might mean to us. We wash our hands before meals to be clean. The Pharisees washed their hands before meals to be religious.

It was one of their many rules. It was one of their traditions beyond the Bible. There was nothing in the Bible that said it was good or bad to wash one's hands before eating. But they made their traditions equal to the Torah, the Bible.

Now we aren't just talking about a quick clean with a Purell handi-wipe. The minimum amount of water to be used was prescribed. It had to be at least enough to fill 1 1/2 egg shells.

First, each hand had to be rinsed by pouring water from the finger-tips to the wrists. Next, the palm of each hand had to be cleaned by rubbing the opposite fist into it. Finally, water had to be poured over each hand again—this time from the wrist to the finger

tips. Omitting of the slightest detail was considered to be sin.

But Jesus comes to the table and says, "Hey, this food looks good. Let's eat!" And He digs in without a drop of hand washing. Jesus, I believe, intentionally uses the hand washing incident to teach them. When Jesus is asked by the pious Pharisee why He has not washed His hands, Jesus says, "You take great care in washing the outside—for appearance sake—but meanwhile the inside remains filthy."

Remember this was a meal time, so it was very easy for Jesus to pick up a cup and say, "It's what's on the inside that counts." It's like Jesus is talking about the coffee cup I have sitting in my office. If you were to look at it from the outside, it looks all clean, but on the inside, it is something completely different. You see I have a habit of leaving just a little bit of coffee in the cup and leaving it on my desk. And after a few days something fuzzy begins to grow in that cup. From a distance you might look at the cup and think it is something you would want to drink out of, but in reality it is really dirty.

I also think of meal times in our home. After a wonderful meal that Monica has prepared, I need to help out in the kitchen with clean-up duty. Now I find it easy to rinse off the dishes and put them in the dishwasher. But what about the pots and pans used to prepare the meal? The insides of those are usually really black and crusty hard from the heat of the oven. So I try this trick. I say, "Monica, let's let the pots soak for a while, and then they will be easier to wash." I know that she will come back to the kitchen later in the evening and clean them. Monica is so smart. She pulls out the Brillo pad, hands it to me and says to me, "Get to work!"

It is hard work cleaning the insides of the pots and pans!

The Pharisees were similar. They did not want to repent and clean out the burnt crud from the insides of their lives. So Jesus gave them His list of warning...His list of "woes".

"Woe to you Pharisees," Jesus said, "because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you fail to treat people with justice. Shame on you!" Just to make a show of their giving, the Pharisees went to their backyard gardens and found their spice trees. The Bible says they had mint and rue. Being originally from the South, I know what mint is. We put that in our iced tea.

Now I'm not familiar with rue, but the scholars say it is an evergreen shrub used in herbal medicine. It is strongly scented, and was actually used in the days of Jesus as a bug repellent. So the Pharisees would go out and find their plants with mint and rue. They would count every ten leaves, and then give one leaf away. They did it for show.

Jesus continued, "Woe to you Pharisees because you always take the very best seats in the synagogue, in the very front row, and you sit there, not so you can see...but so that you can be seen! Shame on you."

They were not up front in the synagogue because they wanted to hear better. They wanted to be seen by everyone—and particularly when they were fasting. The Pharisees had a bad habit of telling everybody about their fast. They would talk about how hungry they were. They would put a sad face on, wouldn't shave. When someone would ask them what was wrong, they would very piously say, "Oh, I

am fasting for the glory of God." In other words, they were just spiritually showing off. Jesus couldn't stand this and He was really giving it to the Pharisees that day.

At this point, a certain scribe stood up and addressed Jesus. "Teacher, when you speak like this, you hurt our feelings." To which Jesus replied: "Well, woe to you, too, you hypocrite! For you have made the scriptures a book of riddles that only confuse the people. Shame on you, too!"

The word that Jesus used for hypocrisy is the Greek word for 'actor' (hypokrites). That Greek word gives us the English word "hypocrite." One of the major forms of entertainment back in the days of Jesus was the theater. Greek and Roman actors would wear large masks and costumes. They would wear platform shoes to make themselves look taller.

In other words, they did everything they could to make themselves appear to be something that they really were not. The word hypocrite soon took on the connotation of someone who treats the world as a stage on which he or she is just playing a part. He tries to make himself appear to be something that he really is not.

What does this have to do with us? Could this be the person who can quote the Bible from one end to the other, but never lives it? Or the person who sits in small group pretending to be pious and religious, but rents x-rated videos to watch in the privacy of their home. Or the one who comes to church and gets all the blessings of the church, but never financially supports the church and helps with its mission of reaching people for Christ. In other words, hypocrites

publicly talk the talk, but privately they don't walk the walk.

But understand this important thing. It is *intentional* on their part. They knowingly and intentionally talk one way...and act another. They are counterfeit Christians. And someone doesn't make counterfeit money by accident! It is different if we mess up and we didn't intend to. This is subtle, but it is very, very important. It is the intention of the heart. You know me well. And you know I am not about guilt. I am about grace.

The sin of the Pharisee was that they *intentionally* did wrong. They took money from the widows. They set up high standards of behavior so that they could be the guardians of the gate, and only they could obey the silly laws of how to wash your hands, and what is permissible on the Sabbath day. You and I often do things that are not pleasing to God, but it is not intentional on our part so we are not hypocrites. And yet that term is so often used against Christians. How many times have we heard the phrase: "I am not coming to church because the church is full of hypocrites"?

I know a young man who was really serious about being a Christ-follower. He went through Confirmation class. He came regularly to worship. But he always came alone. His parents came only at Christmas and Easter. One day, he did something where he did not obey his parents. They scolded him and accused him of being a hypocrite. "You go to church and claim to be a Christian, but see what good it does. You are just a hypocrite!" Those words really crushed the young man and he wondered if he should quit coming to church. The accusation of hypocrisy in their son was used by the parents to justify their lack of interest and commitment to God.

Yes, you and I have heard the phrase so many times, "I am not going to church because the church is full of hypocrites." I find that is not the real issue. It is just a convenient line used by people who don't want to make the effort to seriously consider what it means to have God in our lives. That is why we like the phrase so much at First Prez that says: "The church is not a museum of saints. It is, rather, a hospital for sinners."

We admit, right up front, that we don't have it all together. That is why we are here on Sunday morning. What gives us unity in this place is not our victories, our accomplishments, but our common brokenness, our need for forgiveness and healing. Hopefully, we don't have too many folks strutting around like Pharisees, projecting an image that we have it all together.

Is it fair to reject the Christian faith because of Christians who are not very Christian? While it is somewhat trite, the phrase "Christians are not perfect, just forgiven," is important to remember. A Christian, no matter how hard he or she tries, cannot be perfect—at least not until we get to heaven. When a Christian slips up in any way then the charge can instantly be, "Hypocrite! I thought you were supposed to be a Christian!" This is unfair because it is not the true meaning of a Christian.

An authentic Christian is someone who has made the decision to follow Jesus. Who has chosen to turn away from their disobedience and rebellion against God. Who has accepted what Jesus did on the cross as the payment for their sins. A Christian is someone who has invited God's leadership into their life. But nowhere in the definition of a Christian is there the idea of perfection.

If you were to come and spend a day with me, I can assure you that I would disappoint you. I love my wife Monica, but you would see how I fail in being the husband I'm supposed to be. I love my three children, but you would see how at times I am impatient with them and don't make them the priority in my life that they deserve.

These are just the easy ones to admit. As a Christian, I remain a sinner who struggles with sin, and often loses. All Christians do. Christians are imperfect human beings trying to live a life in Christ, often failing at that task on a daily basis.

What actually happens when you become a Christian is that you begin the process of being transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ. Christians are not cured of all sin and imperfection, but in becoming Christians they have clearly entered the hospital for treatment. The real issue is Jesus, not the behavior of those who try and follow Jesus.

Imagine that Kaneohe Elementary School down the road decides it wants its students to perform Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. You have never heard the actual work, but have often heard about it, so you plan to attend. Now when you go and hear the concert by that elementary school, would it be fair to judge the brilliance of Beethoven based on that performance? I would say, "Don't be too quick to make up your mind about Beethoven based on that concert. They're just kids." For you see that the elementary school performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony would have nothing to do with the actual brilliance of Beethoven's music.

There are a lot of Christians

walking around trying to live for Jesus, myself included, who are like elementary school kids attempting Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Don't judge the composer or the music by our performance. Just remember: Christians may disappoint you, but Christ won't. No matter who plays it, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is still a pretty good piece of music.

We are to take just the opposite attitude of the Pharisees. Instead of judging, who is out and who is in, God wants us to accept and help each other.

There was a church. It was made up primarily of older people. There was this young girl who had just come to faith in Jesus Christ. Her grandmother was a member of that church. But this young girl didn't look anything like the rest of that aging congregation. She had spiked hair, lots of tattoos and was pierced in several places. But she had become a Christian and wanted to join the church. The wise pastor on the Sunday this young girl joined the church published in the bulletin something he called, "A Radical Welcome!" It read:

"We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, gay, filthy rich, dirt poor, yo no habla Ingles. We extend a special welcome to those who are crying new-borns, skinny as a rail, or could afford to lose a few pounds. We welcome you if you can sing like Andrea Bocelli (please join the choir!) or can't carry a tune in a bucket. You're welcome here if you just woke up or just got out of jail. We don't care if you're more Catholic than the Pope, more Baptist than Billy Graham or don't identify as Christian at all.

"We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60, but not grown up yet, and to teenagers who are growing up too fast.

We welcome soccer moms, NASCAR dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, junk-food eaters. We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted.

“We welcome you if you’re having problems or you’re down in the dumps or if you don’t like ‘organized religion’, we’ve been there too. If you blew all your offering money on lottery tickets, you’re welcome here. We offer a special welcome to those who work too hard, don’t work, or because grandma is in town and wanted to go to church. We welcome those who are inked, pierced, or both.

“We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down your throat as a kid, or got lost this morning and wound up here by mistake. We welcome tourists, seekers, doubters... and we welcome you!”

Now that’s a warm welcome! Such a different feeling than you would get from the Pharisees. It doesn’t matter if we look alike, or if we disagree sometimes on how things should be done. What matters is that we realize that God loves each of us so much that He willing sacrificed His Only Son—for us!

We are all going to mess up. Being here this morning doesn’t mean we have our act together. It means we are trying. We are trying our best. But it is not about keeping God’s rules. It’s about a relationship with God.

Because this scripture is about a meal, I remember and love the story of the pastor who had recently moved to the South. He was in a home of the members of his church on a Sunday afternoon

after church. As is so typical in Southern hospitality, the mother of the family had gone all out. The table was set with the finest linen. She had the best china out for the pastor. And on the table there were tall glasses of iced tea.

In that family there were two young boys and an older sister. The sister was making that transition into becoming a teenager. At times she felt, and acted awkward. That day as the mother went into the kitchen to bring out the turkey for the luncheon, the sister sat down at the table. In her teenage awkwardness she knocked over one of the tall glasses of iced tea. It made a mess over the fine linen tablecloth. Her father paused and after a moment of hesitation, wanting to spare his daughter embarrassment, he reached over and knocked over his iced tea. The two young boys thought this was great. They looked at their dad. And they knocked over their iced tea.

At this point the pastor didn’t know what to think. Perhaps this is some southern tradition he had never heard of. And so to be gracious guest, with a grand flair, he took his arm and knocked over his glass of iced tea. About that time mother arrives from the kitchen, carrying the turkey. She can’t believe what has happened to her beautiful linen table. It is a disaster. And her husband, as he takes the turkey from her, winks, encouraging mom to knock over her iced tea.

Fifteen years later a young missionary woman was being interviewed. The reporter asked her: “When was the first time you experienced grace in your life? Do you remember?” She said, “Yes. I will never forget it. It was the day my mother and my father let me know that I was more important than some fancy linen tablecloths. I

was more important than some silly social customs, some rules. I was even more important than the pastor. And I knew if I mean this much to my father and my mother, how much more I must mean to God!”

It was about a **relationship**, not **rules**. Rules result in **guilt**. A relationship with Jesus results in **grace**.

Closing Prayer: Father, we do ask for Your help. Many of us here this morning might have a lot in common with the Pharisees. We may think we look good on the outside; we might ‘do’ all the right things; we might go to church every week; we might even serve in the church—but if our hearts do not have a real love for You God and for Your people. We are like coffee cups with mold growing inside.

Help us not to be actors—to wear masks. Help us not to go through the motions because it is what we are expected to do. Create us in us a clean heart O God. Renew us, and fill us with Your Spirit. Let us leave here today being reminded that “Christians are not perfect, just forgiven.” We make our prayers in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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Note: Our Sunday sermon texts are also available at www.fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes or from fpc.posterous.com. It can also be sent to you by e-mail. You may request the free audio version at: fpchhawaii@gmail.com