

I want to tell you about my week.

At first I took refuge from our texts for the day in my books. I have several good books about Mark's Gospel, few less on Deuteronomy, and so I spent a while with some old dead friends thinking about what Jesus *really* meant in our text for the day.

When you really don't want to face up to what a text calls for, studying it can be a great way to avoid it for a while. I have lots of books. I can stay busy indefinitely.

Then I was able to find office distractions to keep myself occupied for a time.

Much like studying a text can be used as an avoidance mechanism, so too can rearranging file. I have lots of files. I can stay busy indefinitely.

What I'm avoiding, of course, is that hypocrisy charge. This text is tough to live with – at least if we read it right.

No one wants to hear about hypocrisy! No one wants to think of themselves as hypocrites.

And of course there were people I could help also – if I really wanted to keep busy.

I had more walk-in traffic this week than I have had in a long time.

Walk in traffic is where someone needs to speak to the pastor. It steps up at the end of the month, generally, and I'm sad to say that much of it is for needs that I can't do a thing about. Our wonderful office administrator Anna is a whiz at figuring out whether or not there's anything we can do.

I left late on Monday, after everyone had gone home, and as I was leaving a man approached me at the door.

He needed rental assistance.

“That’s just not a ministry that our church is equipped to provide,” I replied. “Perhaps one of the churches in Buckhead would be better equipped.”

“Well maybe your church ought to get equipped to provide rental assistance,” he retorted.

“Perhaps so,” I said, “But we’re not today.”

With that he started away. I got into my car and lingered a minute to see which direction he was going. Then I cranked the engine and drove away.

Now I know that there are appropriate agencies and that we aren’t one.

But do you see why this text is troubling me?

So then the next morning when I arrived at the office, Anna already waiting for me with a gentleman who needed our church’s help. Now I am pretty hardnosed about reality, believe it or not. I get asked for the church’s money constantly and I get asked for my own money constantly. I get two three letters a week seeking institutional help from Morningside. With the church’s money, we stay on budget. I get two to three letters a week asking me to make a donation. With my own money, I stay on budget. It’s just what happens. As far as plans go, I’m pretty sure of it. But without going into the fine points of details, I was able to offer him a little help on the part of the church. I called the pharmacy and paid for some prescriptions and went to the filling station and bought some gas. And briefly, I felt better.

There’s just something about writing a sermon about the love of God when you don’t help people that is deeply troubling.

There’s something much worse about writing a sermon about the love of God and hypocrisy when you can’t help someone.

I should have written this sermon right then while I was still feeling good.

And then the next morning I arrived and this time Anna met me in the parking lot.

“There’s a woman waiting in the welcome center,” she said, “And she won’t leave until she speaks to the pastor.”

I had a counseling appointment arriving shortly and I had a sermon to write. I thought to myself that if I just kept her in the welcome center I could salvage some time.

I sat down on the couch opposite our guest.

“Can we go into your office and speak privately,” she asked.

Everyone deserves dignity. “Of course,” right this way.

I left the door open a crack and listened to her story.

I didn’t think I could help her but I made a couple of phone calls. No luck. She would need to try elsewhere. So I offered her a bottle of water as I let her know we weren’t equipped to take care of her needs. There are, of course, agencies for these things.

Later, I closed my office door and attempted to work. When I came out of my office to go to a lunch appointment, she had returned seeking help. I confess I thought not-nice thoughts.

“No,” I said, “We don’t have any more resources that we had earlier.”

“Will you drive me to Clairmont and North Druid Hills,” she countered.

Time, like money, is also in short supply sometimes.

“No,” I said, “I have to be elsewhere and that is not the way I am going. I’m sorry I can’t help you today.”

I went to my luncheon.

When I returned, Anna was back at her desk, “I heard you had a visitor.”

“Same one,” I replied, “These people really need to leave me alone. I need to write a sermon about Jesus.”

That Mark lesson is all about doctrinal purity... right?

But doctrinal purity isn't a problem for us. We're not an “anything goes” group of Christians, but we're also not sitting around making lists of things that defile people.

Surely this text doesn't have anything to say to us, does it?

I just can't seem to get past that line about people honoring God with their lips, not when I turned people away for all the right reasons. It's going to be a problem, I can tell.

You see, we're headed to that table back there today. I know we do this once a month on first Sundays and I do get that it can sometimes feel pro forma. And the problem that this presents is that while I know that when we go back there we're all going to get to that table and we're not going to be alone.

Jesus will be there, just like he always is, whether it feels pro forma or not. He's there as the unseen host and we're going to be crowded around it.

(Yes, I do completely get that we'll all be crowded around it while sitting in our pews, but work with me on this.)

And while we are crowded around that table with Jesus, all those folks I couldn't help are going to be there with us. Now we might not be able to see them, but they'll be there.

A while back I preached a sermon about the next opportunity you're going to get to represent Jesus to someone, to be Christ to them, and before I knew what had happened, one of you was already back to me. Apparently it didn't take a half a day before the opportunity was there.

He said to me, “I knew full well I could very well be getting taken for a complete ride, but I also knew that I’d be better off for having ridden along.”

Nothing we ever do for the sake of the Gospel is wasted.

Now, should it appear that this sermon is an exercise in self-therapy, well, it might be, but I’m not alone in what I’m thinking. Yes, I am relatively prosperous, but I am also relatively generous. I know very well that many, if not all of you fit the exact same description. We have all that we *really* need, and if we’re lucky, a little extra. And Jesus wasn’t talking about *money* when he was excoriating the Pharisees for their seemingly wrongheaded fascination with all things ritual.

No, its just that those Pharisees were so *sure* of themselves.

You see, all through Mark, Jesus seems to be terribly concerned that the people who are following him *get* what is important. And he’s always suggesting in what he says that if we think we’ve nailed down the kingdom of God, we’ve missed it. As soon as we think we have it, then as sure as we can imagine, it moves.

Those Pharisees were just sure that they had it down.

Now remember, the Pharisees weren’t bad people. I’ve made it a little bit of a personal mission to rehabilitate the image of the Pharisees because I’m pretty sure I am one. I know my book of order. I have degrees in theology. I work for a church.

I can definitely see the redeeming qualities of the Pharisees. They were able to mediate the life of faith such that it was easy to understand. If you needed to know how to do things decently and in order in the first century, the Pharisees could tell you.

The Pharisees were the pillars of their faith community. They knew where the keys to the pantry were located. They could be counted on to switch the lights on and off.

If you needed someone who could help you understand what God demanded of you, the Pharisees could help. They knew their doctrine. They could be counted on to worship right.

Frankly, the church could do with a few more Pharisees these days.

But they were just so sure about everything.

And the problem with that is the trappings are never the end. And the end is never fixed.

God is always working for redemption. God is always looking for what is needed next.

And perhaps most importantly, God cannot be contained.

It's not that doctrine isn't important.

It's not that how we worship isn't important.

It's not that we should have any expectation that we can do everything for everybody.

It's that we remember that God is always at work for us, for others, redeeming and loving us.

I'm not going to lie. It rested very uneasily on me to write a sermon about a text where Jesus called some folks hypocrites when they were so sure of what they were doing. And I do know that whatever we do won't be enough. But then I had another lection for the day, from James, echoing in my ears about every generous act and every gift being from above. It had a way of making me uncomfortably humble. I don't always do humble well. I'd rather do good things and think well of myself.

Now mind you, I don't think I'm any worse of a hypocrite than most. And as long as we're calling names, I don't think you're any worse of a hypocrite than most. It's just that if we think we have Jesus all figured out, we don't.

We don't have Jesus all figured out. We never will.

But we do know where to find him.

At this table, Jesus welcomes all. Even us.

And that's good news.

It's good news because there will always be something that is asked that we can't do.

And there will also always be something asked that we could do and don't want to. And there will always be something that we want to do and don't get around to.

But good news: God loves us, every one of us.

And yes, we are still a great big bunch of sinners. And yes, the word hypocrite might apply to us now and then.

The kingdom of God is always moving, always needing, always calling.

And yes, when you think of it this way, God's grace looks like a moving target. But when you need God's grace, count on it to loop back around to you. Count on it.

Because God's grace is bigger than you and me.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.