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“Give alms, and behold, everything will be clean for you” (Luke 11:41).

Gal 5:1-6: Luke 11:37-41

In ancient Greek theater, wearing masks indicated the emotions of the characters. An actor was called a “hypocrite” because he or she spoke their lines from behind a mask.

When Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites, he meant that what they said did not reflect their real motives. They postured as good and righteous teachers, but in fact they were scheming and dishonest. In today’s Gospel, Jesus mocks their obsession with ritual purity —washing the outside of cups and bowls while ignoring the inside-- as a metaphor for their hypocrisy.

Jesus then offers a remedy to prove their sincerity. If they really want to be what they pretend to be, let them give alms. This was a touchy subject because it exposed a practice called “corban” in which clergy “gave to God” the tithes they owed their parents (Mark 7:9-13). They used a pious rule they had made up to avoid the commandment to honor their parents. Their corruption was not just about being truthful; it was about money.

We do not have to look far to find “actors” in public and professional life. Candidates for office get elected by tailoring their positions from audience to audience, masking their views on controversial topics during interviews or using ambiguity and opaqueness to appear to support what they oppose and oppose what they support. “Statesmen” are politicians who don’t get re-elected because they refused to play along or please big donors.

Easy to criticize, but don't we all wear masks, calling it a social skill, telling half-truths and small lies to protect our personas and our privacy? We go along to get along (or ahead), compromise when we should have taken a stand, say nothing when we should have said something. Honesty, like idealism, becomes a luxury few can afford in a society that rewards complicity and conformity.

Jesus' remedy for hypocrisy can rescue us as well. Alms are another way to level the playing field, commit to right relationships, tithe our time, talent and wealth to help others so that everyone gets their due. We live the truth by sharing our lives with the needy, acknowledging that our advantages often weigh upon their disadvantages, and that our surplus belongs to others. We will not escape life's inequities, its unfairness, even its undeserved blessings and losses, and we will always be sinners. But we need not be hypocrites. We survive together by giving and accepting mercy.

Jesus knew something about being transparent. It was because he was honest that his critics could snipe at him, distort his words and try to trap him as a heretic, an enemy of Rome, Herod and the Temple establishment. Their masked motive was to have him silenced. Jesus also knew something about cups, inside and out. He shared and drank the cup of our humanity, then poured out his life as a pure offering for the forgiveness of our sins.

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