

Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 17
RCL Lectionary, Year B

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9 / Psalm 15 / James 1:17-27 / Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

August 30th, 2009
The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Keeping Up Appearances

by **The Rev. Richard E. Helmer**

As I and the other parents of Classroom 1 at Edna Maguire gathered around the school room door eagerly Thursday morning, Mrs. Stachon lined up Daniel and the other children outside the door and promptly at 8:30 invited them all into class. . . but then, before we parents could move a muscle, she shut the door!

For a moment I could feel all the parents' hearts sink, as we were left standing outside – left outside in the foggy cold of last Thursday morning. That invisible but emotional umbilical cord between us parents and our children was trimmed just a bit more. This was not like Kindergarten where we could walk in and out with our kids, where we felt we were an integral part of the class from the beginning, where we could revert to our own childhood and recall the primordial lessons of life. And so a few of us paused for a moment and gazed through the glass longingly at our children sitting down on the rug with happy, nervous, first-day-of-first-grade smiles. Whence Kindergarten? Were those happy days gone forever?

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It's easy to misunderstand the juxtaposition of today's reading from Deuteronomy and our gospel reading. With Moses commending the Law to the ancient Israelites in Hebrew Scripture on the one hand, we can gather that Jesus in his own day is being dismissive of those most observant of that Law on the other. We might be tempted to think that the Law was a hollow shell, that Jesus is arguing that Moses was all washed up, and assert – echoing some of the worst periods of Christian history – that our tradition somehow supplants that of our Jewish sisters and brothers.

But nothing could be farther from the truth. Jesus is getting at something else entirely in today's Gospel – something that was preventing the faithful of his birth tradition from embracing the full measure of Moses' instruction in Deuteronomy. Jesus is speaking out against an arrogance and a duplicity most egregiously evident in the example of the religious authorities, who are called, accurately or inaccurately, Pharisees and scribes by the author of Mark. The Pharisees and scribes represent the religious authorities who oppress themselves and the people around them with appearances; by enforcing an inherited tradition of practices that were, at the surface, authentic, but underneath, they were devoid of faithful heart.

I want to talk a bit about *Keeping Up Appearances*, a BBC comedy that made its way into family lore when one of my cousins noticed our grandmother's flower arranging book could be glimpsed in the opening credits. The series stars Patricia Routledge in a brilliant portrayal of Hyacinth Bucket (pronounced *Bouquet*) – that's spelled B-U-C-K-E-T. Hyacinth is the perpetual social climber, who suffers the embarrassment of a crazy father and three sisters leading eccentric lives: Daisy and her welfare-dependent dead-beat husband, Onslow. They live together on the wrong side of the tracks in town with another sister, leggy Rose, who wears short skirts and, when she's not brazenly hitting on the parish vicar, changes boyfriends at least one a week in her quixotic pursuit of a harlequin romance. Then there's Violet, who lives in an impressive home in apparent affluence – with a Mercedes, pool, Jacuzzi, and room for a Pony, as Hyacinth often proudly tells nervous guests over for tea. But if the surface is scratched even a little bit, it turns out that Violet's life is far from happy, even less so than any of her sisters. Her husband, Bruce, is a perennial cross-dresser in a don't-ask-don't-tell society, and needless to say, their marriage is constantly filled with the strife that comes with what appears to be profoundly closeted truths – which sometimes go public in ways that utterly humiliate Hyacinth's social avarice.

As the series revolves around Hyacinth continually putting on airs to impress high society in small-town Britain, we laugh as she founders in her social climbing with her unrefined antics and the constant embarrassing presence of her odd, yet ordinarily dysfunctional and sometimes heartwarming authentic family. But the flip side is that Hyacinth is also a tragic figure, embodying the worst efforts of trying to lead a life constructed around attempting to please others. Worse, she aspires to emulate a class that is constantly depicted in the series as miserable in its own arrogance and duplicity.

Poor Hyacinth, she is so obsessed with her social station that she can never be happy nor contented in a comfortable middle-class home, nor hear even the most plaintive pleas of her gentle, loveable husband who dreads retirement and what more time at home with Hyacinth will mean to his sanity. Richard has learned over the years to cope with Hyacinth's antics by rolling his eyes, and to sigh as he drives her hither and yon in her social climbing misadventures, "minding the pedestrian."

But what makes Hyacinth truly comic in the classical sense – that is tragic and funny at the same time – is that she represents the worst obsessions of the industrialized West. We are bombarded each day with advertising that unceasingly offers us something external to who we are that will make us whole, make us happy, make us complete. Doesn't matter if it's a product or a service, we are continually told to look outside of ourselves for status; to put on the clothes, make-up, cars or homes, or sign up for the services that conceal or compensate for the parts inside us that most need healing. Rarely do we hear the wisdom of the inner resources we have already received – for free, I might add – from our God. And, of course, we fear at some level that our entire system of economic enterprise might collapse if we truly begin to believe that God's gifts to us are truly *enough*.

Jesus is not dismissive of the Law nor the ancient traditions of his people in today's Gospel. Rather, he unabashedly counters the Pharisees' and scribes' claims to righteousness and reminds his followers that they cannot lead a life with God through an inauthentic, external show of tradition. In short, he tells them that the path to God is not found in keeping up appearances. Hyacinth's obsession with bragging over her precious Royal Doulton tea set with the hand-painted periwinkles is the spiritual equivalent of the Pharisees' obsession over their own clean hands. And Hyacinth's constant denial of the dirt in her own family is akin to the Pharisees trying to wash away the dirt of their own hearts by cleansing their extremities.

Jesus makes no bones: This brand of holiness – made of pretense – is false because it has no rootedness in an inner life of faith. His interlocutors are tragically hollow, like Hyacinth, constantly climbing and never arriving – embarrassed by their own sisters and brothers, who, while sinners in every way in the eyes of the Law, at least are authentic in their missteps and imperfections.

The Pharisees, too, are stuck at the window, like I was for a moment on Thursday morning, looking into an idealization of the past rather than addressing the critical pieces inside themselves in the present. They are living into a romanticism about the past being somehow holier; of wanting to go back to the remembered innocence of their traditions' equivalent of Kindergarten: of a people at the edge of new life in the Promised Land, gathered around their heroic teacher and leader, Moses, a Holy Man of God, eagerly eating up every word that falls from his lips. Just as I was tempted to be a first-grader again, forgetting everything that has happened since I was six years old, the Pharisees seem tempted to be ancient Israelites again, acting as though they've hearing and articulating the Law for the first time, forgetting all that has happened since Moses: the depths of justice behind the Law that the prophetic tradition has since reasserted; and the healing truths that Jesus point to that make their shared tradition solid, living and vital, rather than hollow, ossified, and dead.

Jesus instructs his disciples and us twenty centuries later to set aside the comparisons and social striving that are so much a part of worldly culture, and instead seek that inner integrity that comes when we read, mark, and inwardly digest the Gospel in word and sacrament. When we take into our bodies, minds, and hearts the deep truths of identity and divine favor that the Law was really meant to embody. Where we “welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save [our] souls.” When we, in the words of the Prophet Jeremiah, at last embrace a Law not external to ourselves, but written on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). For good, like evil, does not come from outside of us, but from within. There is no good in concealing that truth with externals: be they practices, status, or material wealth.

And if we truly embrace this Gospel truth, we are no longer batted about by the advertising, chances, and worldly concerns that continually try to dominate our lives. Nor are we so vulnerable to the ephemeral opinions of others, nor obsessed with the romanticism of a lost past or childhood. Rather, we find ourselves on a path to living into the wholeness our God intends for us in the present: as a people who live out of transformed hearts; as a people renewed from within and set free from keeping up appearances.