

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, we meet one of literature's most diabolical villains. His name is Iago. Through his monologues, the reader sees into the true nature of his two-faced heart, but the main characters in the play believe him to be honest. *Othello* uses the epithet "honest" 10 times to describe Iago. He appears to be a reliable soldier to whom people routinely turn in times of crisis.

And yet the reader is privy to Iago's chilling self-description at the beginning of play, where he says, *"I am not what I am."* I am not what I am. In other words, he is a self-conscious and conniving hypocrite, appearing to be honest and helpful, yet actually narcissistic and destructive. He appears to be working for the good of others, but as he tells the audience *"I follow myself."*

Shakespeare knew the miasmatic terrain of the human heart. Shakespeare also knew the Bible backward and forward. This is what I love about the Bard – his often bawdy but always penetrating exposure of human nature, always imposed over the wisdom of the Scriptures. So when Iago says of himself, *"I am not what I am"*, Shakespeare is deliberately presenting this villain as an "Anti-Creator", in direct opposition to God's description of Himself in the Old Testament, *"I Am Who I Am."*

Just as God, who is who He is, creates life and health and salvation, Iago, who is not what he is, spawns death and despair and damnation. And the Tragedy of *Othello*, the Moor of Venice indeed ends in death for the principles and damnation for the "hellish villain". All of which is the evil outworking of Iago's galling hypocrisy.

It is the galling hypocrisy of the Pharisees that Jesus condemns in this morning's gospel. And although the Pharisees were not as self-consciously evil as Iago, the consequence of Phariseeism is the same: death, despair and damnation.

So, who are the Pharisees? Bible readers will notice that Jesus' condemnation is reserved for the Pharisees. To the so-called "sinners", the harlots, and tax collectors, the drunkards and gluttons, Jesus speaks words of comfort and welcome. This is why Jesus is called "The Friend of Sinners." To his disciples, who are riddled with doubt and incomprehension, and who betray or abandon Jesus in the hour of his death, Jesus says, "Peace be with you." Jesus says, "I call you friends."

But to the Pharisees and the religious leaders of the day Jesus unleashes his wrath. *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces."* Jesus calls the Pharisees "*children of hell*," "*blind guides*," and "*whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.*" In Iago's words, the Pharisees are "not what they are". As Jesus says to them, "*you outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.*"

So it's clear the Pharisees really rile Jesus up. It is best to avoid what riles Jesus up, don't you think? What does Phariseesim look like today? It takes many forms but has this in common: Pharisees judge and condemn others by the externals of appearance and behavior.

Everybody has experience with being judged and found wanting. I went to a party in Richmond recently and guessed wrong about the dress code. I was "business casual" but most all the other men were in ties. I should have known, I grew up in Richmond. So of course I spent the entire party worrying about my tie-less-ness instead of concentrating on the people I was talking to or enjoying the party. This is pathetic. I guess you can take the boy out of Richmond, but you can never take the Richmond out of the boy.

But, everyone has been in some situation where you feel uptight, unable to be yourself, because you do not meet the exacting external standards of the group. Everybody has had to play act to get through.

In the gospel today, Jesus condemns the religious form of Phariseeism, which is indeed insidious – people who judge or condemn other people for not measuring up to certain standards of piety. The Pharisees condemn the disciples for not following the rigid code of ceremonial hand washing established by the religious tradition. In the eyes of the Pharisees, Jesus' disciples were not worthy – they were spiritually dirty and defiled because they ate with unwashed hands.

This still goes on. You come into a church or a group of Christians where grace should be proclaimed, but then you start feeling like you are not good enough, or you don't pray enough, or you don't give enough, or you don't believe enough. Or you are made to feel like you have to hide the anger or jealousy or lust or greed that you feel because those feelings aren't appropriate for a Christian.

My experience and identity as a minister shows me that most people feel this way - they equate Christianity with moral censure. That's why when I'm away on vacation I don't like to tell people what I do. If they find out, then they start apologizing for their language and they stop asking me to join them for drinks and they start treating me either like I've got leprosy or like I'm the Queen of England.

When Phariseesim trumps actual Christianity, one of two things can happen. You just leave the church because you can't stand hiding who you truly are. Or you become a hypocrite and Pharisee. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em! You become adept at leading a double life. The church forces you to be like Iago – "I am not what I am." And you do this until you finally have a break down, until you finally cannot be who you are not.

Phariseeism is so dangerous because it destroys people. It creates woe because it makes people appear to be what they are not. That dis-integration of a person

disintegrates a person: it leads to death. No one can ultimately survive being who they are not; no one who is not what he is will be able stand in the presence of “I Am Who I Am.”

Jesus unleashes his woe on the Pharisees because Phariseeism destroys people. And Jesus loves people. Jesus wants you to be filled with goodness and life and health. He created you and loves you and desires you to be who you are rather than who you are not.

And nobody knows better than Jesus that who you are isn't always pretty. He knows that who you are so often fails to meet the standards. After all, his description of your heart in today's gospel isn't very flattering. “*Out of the heart of a man come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting*”and the sorry list goes on and on.

This is clearly not an “I'm O.K. – You're O.K.” message. Because if I'm OK and You're OK, then what is He doing hanging up on the cross?

Although the description of our hearts is on the one hand difficult to hear, on the other hand there is great relief. Jesus knows me for who I am. There is great relief in not having to pretend to be better than I am. This is what we do every week when we confess our sins.

And the deeper relief is the message of the gospel – the true Christian message, rather than the fiendish message of the Pharisees. Christianity is not about what you do, it's about what Jesus did for you! Jesus has lived up to God's standard for you. He lived the life that you cannot live and he now imputes, or gives that life to you. Because He died for the sin generated out of your heart, you are loved and accepted as you are. There is no need to pretend.

This is the heartbeat of real Christianity; it is the lifeline for all who long to be who they actually are. This is the message we proclaim at Christ Church. That is the gospel. Ross Byrd, our former Urban Missioner, has returned as the Director of our High School Youth Group as Liz continues with our Middles Schoolers. The Youth Group's mission, I believe, says it all.

Our mission in everything from Bible Studies to Busch Garden trips is two fold: **First, that we would be a community where teenagers feel welcomed and loved just the way they are.** That is, we want to be a safe place where students do not have to pretend, but are allowed to be themselves, and to connect with one another and with leaders in authentic relationships. **Second, that the gospel would be constantly be made known.** In other words, that our students, both Christian and non-Christian would never stop hearing from us the GOOD NEWS of Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection for our sins and the redemption of the world.

For those who wish to be who they are, that is the final word. Amen.

