Sunday, April 30, 1989
HYPOCRISY: ITS USE AND MISUSE
Luke 13:10-17

It was not the habit of Jesus to call people names, but when He became angry, He sometimes did so. That's what happened in the story read to you earlier from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues — we don't know which one, but most likely it was in His native Galilee. It was the Sabbath Day. In the crowd, there was a woman who had been crippled for 18 years. Luke describes her as being "doubled over." She could not stand up straight. What the cause of her infirmity was, we do not know.

There have been some intriguing theories as to the cause of her being bent over. Several years ago, I read an article about this "bent over" woman in one of the theological journals I regularly receive. The article reported that in a women's Bible study group, the leader asked them, "What, in your experience, might cause a woman to be bent over for 18 years?"

The answers were instructive. One woman said, "Her children caused her to be bent over for 18 years. That's the minimum sentence that parenthood brings." Another said, "Don't forget her husband. She was probably permanently bent over from picking up his dirty socks for 30 years."

Still another said that maybe she was tired of working like a slave for a minimum wage or even tired of working like a slave at home for no wages at all.

"Maybe she had a doctorate in economics," suggested another woman, "and found that nobody listened when she talked about inflation and tax structures, but instead paid attention to some pompous man — even if he hadn't read a serious book on the subject for years."

"Or perhaps every time she held her head up and tried to be somebody, the people around her, both male and female, did all they could to deflate and diminish her again," said another participant.

Whatever the cause was, Jesus noticed her and said, "You are healed of your deformity." And then He touched her, and she stood up straight! She hadn't come to the synagogue to be healed. We have no reason to think that she asked to be healed, or even hoped to be healed. She was there. Jesus saw her and made her well.

Now we come to the part of the story that I want to explore in particular this morning. Luke tells us that the leader of the synagogue was indignant because Jesus had once again broken the Sabbath Law. It had happened before, and it happened again. Jesus was forever crossing borders, as I noted in last week's sermon. The border He crossed this time, as He had before, was the rule that no work of any kind could be done on the Sabbath.

The amazing part of this story about the conflict between Jesus and the Sabbath Law is that the leader of the synagogue didn't say anything to Jesus himself. He didn't directly criticize Him for violating the Law. Rather, he rebuked the people for giving Him the opportunity to do so. He turned to the people and said, "There are six workdays in the week, and if anyone wants to be healed, he can come on one of those days and not on the Sabbath in which no work can be done." In other words, he criticized the woman whom Jesus had healed. We call that "blaming the victim." The leader of the synagogue was in effect saying to the woman, "It's

all your fault; if you hadn't been here, the Sabbath Law would not have been broken." There are many times even today in our society when we blame the victim. A woman is raped, and we say, "It's all your fault; you tempted the rapist."

Jesus, in that tense moment, looked at the people and said, "You hypocrites!" There's no one among us who likes to be called a hypocrite.

What did Jesus mean by calling those who criticized Him "hypocrites?" The word in Greek means something quite simple: It means an actor or actress. The word "hypocrite" is used to refer to a person who plays a part on the stage in which he or she pretends to be something that he or she is not. Hamlet, for example, at the end of the play is killed. He dies before our eyes, and a few minutes later, there he is, as large as life, taking his curtain calls. He only pretends to die.

Actresses and actors on the stage or in the movies or on television play many parts. They know they are pretending, and we know they are pretending, so no one is deceived.

Now Jesus takes the same word and applies it to those who criticized Him for healing on the Sabbath. He was saying, you are acting a part in real life. You are pretending to be something you are not. However, in this case, He was saying, "You people don't know you are pretending, and maybe even you aren't aware you are pretending. So you are deceiving yourself and others."

He reminded them that they made exceptions to the Sabbath Law all the time. As one example, He pointed out that there is provision in the interpretation of the Law for a man to untie his cattle and take them to water. And yet, Jesus said, when I take a human being and lead her from deformity to normal, natural health, you say that I am breaking the Law. And worse than that, you blame her for it because she was present here on the Sabbath.

"You hypocrites." Outwardly you are models of religious and moral conformity. No question can be raised about your conduct. But inwardly, you are self-centered creatures who have missed the whole point of the Law. The point of it is to make right relationships between God and human beings and between us as human beings. You have lost the spirit of the Law in the complicated network of rules and regulations.

So when Jesus called them hypocrites, He pointed to the gap between what they did and what they were; to the discrepancy between the outward appearance and the inward reality; and to the inconsistency between the profession and the performance.

One of the most serious charges made today against groups of people in society is that of being hypocrites. People who attend church are often called hypocrites by those who choose not to be a part of the church. Young people are frequently most vocal in making the charge of hypocrisy against people in the older generations.

They charge us in the older generations with hypocrisy on the ground of past performance. They are saying — you claim to believe in the sanctity of marriage, yet you set the pace of the present divorce rate, which is one out of three marriages in this country. You say you believe in equality, yet you have condoned the segregation of Black people and other minorities in this country for years. You say you believe one thing, and yet you act in another, opposite way. You are guilty of hypocrisy.

As one of the older generation, I accept that charge, but I want to add several comments to it.

First of all, we are all actors by nature. We are born that way. All of us know how little children have an uncanny ability to mimic their elders. They are little actors and actresses. Part of their play is to pretend to be something they are not. So children play house, and they play all sorts of other roles as well. Some children and adults choose acting as a profession to entertain other people. And there are other people who do not choose acting as a vocation, but they never let anyone see who they really are — not so much because there is anything to hide as because there is too much to show.

I've met people, as you have, who are, as we say, "reserved." There are people who will not talk about themselves very much or reveal their innermost thoughts. They may have many friends, but to know them intimately is impossible. We can say of them that they are acting a part, but in a sense, they have no choice. It is their nature not to be easily exposed or readily grasped. The deepest things in them come out indirectly, and not when people try to draw them out. Some observers of human nature have even said that the greater the person, the less likely you are to see the core of their lives.

So remember when we call another a hypocrite — there is something in all of us that endows us with the magic ability to act. Some have it more than others, but none is entirely without it. In any judgment we make of another person, we can never safely overlook this unconscious, unpremeditated necessity to play a part.

The second comment is this: There are times when there is nothing finer that a person can do than to act a part in real life. A mother, for example, goes into the sick room of a child who is at the brink of death. As she enters that room day after day, she shows not the slightest sign of anxiety or doubt that the child will get well. Inwardly she is troubled and anxious; outwardly, she is calm and confident. She is acting a part, and she is doing it for the child's sake. And it isn't until years later that the child, now grown up, realizes what a heroic part that was and what a blessing it was that she could play it.

Or here is a person in a public position who faces people who are in trouble, but he never lets them see the troubles of his own life. He is there to help them, and in a sense, he acts a part so that their troubles will not be aggravated by his troubles. His troubles are his own and are not to be added to the burdens that others are carrying. Certainly, there may come a time when he can tell them his own troubles, but now would be the wrong time. I always remember what Jesus said to His disciples one day, "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."

Did you ever wonder whether Jesus, when He stood so imperturbable before Pilate at that final trial, was quite so quiet inside as He appeared on the outside? I would not be surprised if He were not, in a sense, acting a part, not wanting Pilate to see how anxious He was.

Or here is a young couple whose marriage is going through a rough time. They both want the marriage to survive. They don't want it to break, so they act in the company of other people as if everything is okay. None of their friends have the slightest idea that there is any trouble. Their acting is very near to being an act of hope and faith that the marriage will not be broken. In their actions, they are reaching out for something good not yet achieved, but not yet surrendered. If they are "hypocrites," it is because their reach exceeds their grasp. Now, of course, they could overdo the acting and act as if nothing is wrong even when they are alone

and so not face their problems. But that's not what we're talking about here. It is possible for us to act our way into a new way of thinking.

So in the midst of war, there are people who can be perfectly honest and still believe in peace. They have not yet achieved it, and they are now involved in the evils of war, but they have not yet surrendered the possibility of peace.

There is a good way to be a hypocrite and a bad way to be a hypocrite. Hypocrisy can be used and misused.

The last comment about hypocrisy is this: No generation or group of people, or brand of religion has a monopoly on hypocrisy. The young, who are the most vocal in making the charge, should be conscious of the fact that the older generation has no exclusive claim on hypocrisy. No one is immune to it. The young, for instance, say that they believe in love, and nothing could be more encouraging than that. But yet it seems as if the circle of their love is not large enough to include many people that they don't like or who are different from them.

We all stand before Jesus, old and young, good and not so good. At times He says to us words that we like to hear, "Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." At other times, He says, "You hypocrites. You are acting a part that isn't really you. You may be doing it to help another person. If you are, God bless you! You may be doing it because by that very acting you are beginning to close the gap between the stars you reach for and the miserable things you grasp. If you are, God bless you! But you may be doing it to save your own skin, to cover up your shortcomings, and to make people think you are something you are not. It can't be done."

I can hear Jesus say to me: "Think twice before you accuse anyone else of hypocrisy. Think twice. But be quick to recognize hypocrisy in yourself. Be yourself. Follow me." Amen.