

Mark 1:40 – 45 “Preachers are Liars”

Preachers are liars. There. I said it. And I’ve got to be careful about how I say this considering the number of clergy who’ve either admitted to or have been accused of using their power and influence to harass or sexually assault church members. That’s a whole different category. That involves abuse of power and serious violations of professional boundaries and clergy ethics. That’s a topic for another time and place. What I’m talking about this morning is not so insidious. It’s different. More general. But to be clear let me say it again: Preachers ... are ... *liars*. “So how is this?” you may ask? Wow. Where do I begin?

Well let’s just start from the beginning. So ... I came to faith later on in life than most folks who were raised in the church. See, I *didn’t* grow up in the church although my family always gave me the freedom to explore matters of faith and religion. I came to faith in July of 1983 at church camp and I was baptized in 1984 in the Missionary Alliance Church. My youth pastor told me that I had some gifts for ministry and that I ought to explore this. I said, “But I have some serious problems with church!” And he said, “And this is why you’ll be a good minister.” Therein began my journey as a liar. Even before I was ordained. Heck, before I was even out of high school. I discovered that you had to be careful about how, where, and to whom you say, “I have a problem with church.” So I learned to keep quiet. I went to college to begin my training. I started teaching Sunday School classes and leading youth groups. And I learned that you had to be extra cautious about asking questions, expressing doubts, or offering opinions about how the church’s values often don’t line up with Jesus’ values. Granted, I was at a disadvantage because I didn’t understand “church culture.” I wasn’t familiar with the traditions and unspoken rules that someone who started out in the cradle learned over the years. But I found out that there were all sorts of people who were quick to school me in those traditions ... none of which seemed to have *anything* to do with what I was learning in my study of the Bible. And at some level, I understood why some of these unspoken rules and taboos were important to church folks even

though those rules were related more to preference and culture rather than core-value Biblical principles. Placement of the communion table, translations of the Bible, having a flag in the sanctuary, hymns with horrific theology, practicing tired old traditions just because it's tradition. In the long run is it really worth making a fuss about? Depends on who you talk to. So I learned to keep my mouth shut. Later on in my journey of ministry, one of our denominational leaders framed it this way -- "Don't get into the habit of being crucified on six-inch crosses. People will stop listening to you." So I thought, "Okay. My failure to speak up about things that may very well warrant a legitimate biblical challenge isn't so much a blatant lie as it is a lie by *omission*. I can live with that. Shoot, it's a "survival in ministry" issue really. If you get on a soap box about *every little thing* that bothers you, people tune you out and you accomplishing *nothing*.

But still. Preachers are liars. Here are some examples of more blatant lies. Lies that *aren't* just omissions. Like when we struggle with the tension of holding faith and doubt in balance. What?! Preachers don't doubt! Right? Or when the tension between certainty and disbelief comes into play. Disbelief?! That's *worse* than doubt! What's wrong with you preacher?! I want to make this clear – We don't *intend* to lie. But when we realize that when our very *livelihood* and *vocational security* sometimes depends on being less than authentic ... well, we do. So we gradually start crafting a renovated, sanitized version of ourselves that's more suited for public consumption. One that reflects more of what we think a pastor is *supposed* to be rather than the person we really are. Where the *real* danger comes is when we actually become comfortable with this carefully crafted façade of religiosity. Then the moment of truth comes ... the moment when we realize we're *lying to ourselves* because we think that this religious "costume" we wear is who we really are. Preachers are liars. Especially when we start to believe our own lies.

But I imagine some of you are thinking, "Well I hate to tell you this preacher, but this ain't all about you because a lot of times *I* feel like this

too!” Well good. I was hoping you would. Because preachers aren’t the only liars in this big ol’ global fellowship of folks that we call the church. We all feel caught up in this identity crisis ... this sad existence of pretending. We so desperately want to be authentic, but we’re terrified because we don’t believe it’s possible. The consequences would be too great. Whether it’s our theology or sociology or sexuality or political-affiliationology or just our regular interaction with the world ... we’ll either soften or just plain conceal the truest parts of ourselves to keep in good standing with our peers and family. After spending so many years trying to pin down why I had problems with the church ... after trying to figure out how I could sum it up in a sentence rather than just making a big laundry list of all the things that bothered me, I finally heard someone state it clearly. This is from John Pavlovitz in his book *A Bigger Table* -- “Organized religion has a way of making us all chronically insincere.” Yes!! That’s it!! Why didn’t I think of that?! Probably because I was busy trying to figure out how to not get crucified on six inch crosses!

So how did we wind up in a place where we believe that we *can’t* be fully ourselves? That we can only be the heavily-edited, carefully censored, highly selective versions of ourselves that we believe will allow us to remain comfortably in the community? A lot of churches have at least learned to separate gospel and culture and come to the conclusion that God actually *wants* us to “come as we are.” At least some churches have studied the scriptures enough to realize that the heart of the Gospel is “all are welcome, and all means all.” But then it doesn’t take long for old habits to return and we start learning to “read the room” again in order to determine exactly what we can reveal about our true selves without being alienated. Then we start re-designing and re-building that “church-specific self” that eventually gets in the way of our ability to pursue an authentic relationship with God and others.

One of the most common responses people give about no longer being connected to a church is that somewhere along the way, some part of their personal revelation proved to be too much for those they were in

community with and all of a sudden they felt like a leper. Well then, let's take a look at the leper in today's passage from Mark's gospel. Although Jesus had healed quite a few people by this point in Mark's gospel, this guy was the first one that the author specifically identified as a leper. A leper, in those days, was basically anyone who was disfigured with a degenerative skin condition. They were deemed unclean, unworthy, and beyond redemption by the religious leaders and therefore the entire community. They were rejected, marginalized, and basically cast out to survive on their own. The popular notion in the day about leprosy was, "If you have it, it's your fault." It's the result of something you did. It's the result of some sin in your life that you may or may not be aware of. The disease itself is punishment. It doesn't matter how nice you are, or how many good deeds you've done, if you are a leper, you don't belong. They were considered the most reviled, least respected members of the community. They were even required to call out "Unclean!" when they came near anyone so that folks could avoid coming into contact with a leper who might render *them* unclean.

So here's Jesus, face to face with this leper who came to him kneeling and begging, to be healed. The poor guy said, "If you *choose*, make me clean." Then Jesus gives sort of an odd response. Mark writes, "Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him." Huh ... "moved with pity?" I didn't think it was necessarily a good thing when a person does something for another out of pity. But ... okay, let's see where it goes from here. Oh great! The leper is healed! But then Jesus "sternly warns him" to "say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." Whoa. That seems a little out of character for Jesus too. But what does the leper do? He went out and "freely proclaimed" his healing and "spread the word." Which caused Jesus to leave town and go out to the countryside because sure enough, the crowds would start pressing in on him. Remember, this happened last week when we read about how he healed Peter's mother-in-law. He ended up moving on from there because of all the people who tracked him down asking to be healed. In Mark's gospel it took Jesus awhile before he said, "Fine.

It's time for me to make myself known." But I don't want this to be all about Jesus. (Which I know sounds scandalous coming from a preacher, but hey I'm trying to be authentic here!)

Let's look at this leper. To say that his life was simply changed is a gross understatement. This leper was *transformed*. He had a new lease on life. He now had the chance to re-enter his community again. How could he *not* say anything? When something that radically transformative happens in your life, you just can't keep it to yourself! He went out and told anyone who would listen to him. He was speaking his truth. He was being authentic. And here's something else to consider, I don't think that *Mark* wanted this to be all about Jesus either. Clearly *the leper* was the focus of attention here! Mark doesn't say, "Then Jesus tracked this guy down and chewed him out for not keeping a secret." There was nothing in this passage that indicated the leper did anything wrong. He was just speaking his truth out of a thankful heart.

But I do have to wonder how this would have played out in today's church. Maybe this guy would have been called into a meeting to be told about how wrong he was to share his good news. I don't know. But I *do* know that this is some people's perception of the church. And to be quite honest, there's justification for that perception too considering the number of people in churches who *have* been told to sit down and shut up for being "too authentic." Somewhere along the line, the church lost sight of what it was commissioned to be – A place where the only person you need to be is the one you are at any given moment: Flawed, failing, fearful, but also loved by God and by the ones you gather with. True community, whether it's a spiritual community or otherwise, only works when we are fully seen and known when we're a part of it. Where we no longer feel burdened to pretend and where guilt or shame or fear are no longer a threat. We can bring our truest selves to the table ... without the insincerity, or "costumes." This is the table that Jesus invites us to each week. This is the table his example demands we set for the world. We, the unclean lepers, all get to dine with our Lord without having to "get clean" first.