

Playing to the crowds

J. D. Vance's lies about Haitian immigrants reveal his willingness to trade his dignity for attention.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [November 2024](#) issue

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(Illustration: francescoch / iStock / Getty)

Nothing seems to boil the blood of Jesus quite like the behavior of hypocrites. That's my take from the biblical evidence. Other sinners—thieves, prostitutes, and murderers, to name a few—receive his reproach in compassionate packaging. Not so with hypocrites. These ones who masquerade as servants of righteousness bear the full brunt of his condemnation.

For most of us, hypocrisy brings to mind inconsistency or duplicity. A person says one thing but does another. But when Jesus describes hypocrisy, it's the trait of those who play to the crowds. The sort of actors who search for human approval, wanting only to be seen. They don any mask that will give an audience what they

want. Their self-worth is measured by what others think of them. Their chief goal is to be noticed, recognized, seen. In Matthew's Gospel, hypocrites are those who blow a trumpet when they give alms, pray ostentatiously, and alter their appearance when fasting, all for one single reason: "in order that others will see them" (6:1).

A desire for attention typically tops the list of psychological and social motivations for people who habitually make up stories. Vice presidential candidate J. D. Vance showed off his playacting credentials in recent weeks by doubling down on his right to make up stories for the sake of garnering attention. "If I have to create stories so that the American media actually pays attention to the suffering of the American people, then that's what I'm going to do," he told a reporter. This stunning admission of a willingness to fabricate stories, with no felt obligation to tell the truth, came on the heels of his cruel rumor about Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, abducting, cooking, and eating the pets of local residents.

The scurrilous nature of Vance's lie achieved what he was after. Not only did he receive the unbroken press coverage he craved, he upped his own sense of self-worth by giving his supporters three things they love to hear: a racialized narrative that Black and Brown immigrants are savages and criminals, the false impression that these Haitian immigrants are "illegal aliens," and the opportunity to have his particular fiction operate as an incendiary device to fuel more conspiracies and hatred.

Accusing immigrants of vulgar eating habits has a long history. When German immigration to the United States increased in the 19th century, many newcomers became the victim of cruel jokes and xenophobia. An ugly rumor surfaced about dogs disappearing when German butchers would arrive in a neighborhood. An American songwriter, Septimus Winner, wrote that rumor into his 1864 song "Der Deitcher's Dog"—*Deitscher* being a common pronunciation of *Deutscher* (German man). We know it today as the nursery rhyme "Oh Where, Oh Where Has My Little Dog Gone?" Winner intended the song to mimic a German immigrant with poor English speculating on the fate of his missing dog. The final verse reveals the fate: "Un sasage ist goot, bolonie of course, / Oh where, Oh where can he be. / Dey makes um mit dog und dey makes em mit horse, / I guess dey makes em mit he." How ironic that Donald Trump would amplify his running mate's blatant fabulism about Haitian immigrants, a slur that could well have been used against his own grandfather emigrating from Germany.

Springfield, Ohio, never asked for the bomb threats, neo-Nazi marches, and hate-filled memes that Vance's shameless playacting has brought on. But the Haitian owner of a religious supply store in Springfield offered a generous word about those perpetuating Vance's lie: "I strongly believe that these people, they're not evil," Jacob Payen told NPR. "They're just lost." That's a perceptive claim. According to Jesus, those so desperate to be seen by others and win their acclaim have lost their core identity. They've reduced their dignity to the applause of others and relegated God to the periphery of their lives.