

"Why Church? Because We're Real People"

Luke 16:1-13

Hypocrisy! It's the single biggest reason people say they don't go to church. According to a recent Barna Research survey, among people with no religious affiliation in the 16 to 29 year-old bracket, 85% say the biggest reason they don't go to church is because Christians are hypocritical.

My response to reading that survey is that our young people are right -- Christians are hypocritical every time there is a contradiction between following Christ and how we live our daily life. What we profess during worship doesn't always match what we do the rest of the week.

My challenge to our young people would be this: find me one group of people on this planet who always live up to their highest values and who never say one thing and do another. Part of being human is that we are all hypocritical to some degree which is why we begin each worship service with confession and forgiveness.

Jesus knew we were all hypocrites which is why in the New Testament, the only time Jesus hurled the charge of hypocrisy was when people were doing something deliberately to appear outwardly different from what they were inwardly. For example in Matthew 6:2, Jesus spoke about people who gave to charity "so that they may be praised by others." Jesus spoke against those who "love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others."

Jesus challenged the religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees for putting on appearances. He said, "for you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth." Jesus called all of those people hypocrites. The Greek word translated as "hypocrite" literally means "actor" or "stage player."

I wonder how many of we Christians come to worship on Saturday night or Sunday morning thinking, "I'm going to church so I can pretend to be righteous and appear to be holy"?

No. When we church people admit to being hypocrites, we aren't confessing to playacting. More often, we mean we failed to follow through on our good intentions or we can still see the gap between the people we are called to be and the people we actually are. But we aren't trying to deceive anybody. We're here to see where we still need to work to bring our behavior up to the level of what we really believe.

I think people in the church understand this which is why it is people outside the church that accuse us of hypocrisy. I've never heard of anyone leaving a church because of hypocrites. More often, people depart because of someone failing them. The congregation was too insensitive or didn't have enough activities for kids, the theology was different from their own, the sermons were boring, they didn't like the new pastor or most often, some issue was never addressed, which after a lengthy period of festering and not talking about it, had blown up and become an excuse for leaving. Thus we realize in the church our daily need for confession and forgiveness.

So for those outside the church with no intention of coming in, it's easy to say it's because of hypocrisy in the church. And it's easy for them to find an example of inconsistency in the behavior of any Christian.

But those of us in the church see it more in terms of human failure and sin that we are all guilty of. Many of us stay in the church because we see it as a place and community in which we can work hard together to improve ourselves and our community in following Jesus more faithfully. In the church we confess the gap between our faith and our daily living and care enough to want to narrow it. In church, we find people not that different from ourselves and who are on faith journeys similar to ours.

Now I'm not saying that we don't have our share of wing nuts and disordered personalities. Whew! But most people in the church are described very well by Jesus in our gospel parable when he says, "Whoever is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much."

Jesus says this right after telling the parable of the dishonest manager who's a guy that's such an outright rascal that we wonder if there's any way he couldn't be a churchgoer. We can't call him a hypocrite because he isn't playacting at anything and he's certainly not worried that he isn't living up to a call from God. He openly admits that he is simply looking after his own hide. He gets what money he can from those in debt to his employer. In verse 8, "his master commended his cleverness, "but we don't go to church hoping to find people like him as Christian models.

As Jesus explains the parable in verse 10, he says, "Whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much." Clear enough. That fits the manager in the parable so part of the point is, "don't be like him."

But Jesus also states it positively by saying, "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much." I think that describes most of the people we meet in church. People who are working hard in striving to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

It is good for our souls to be among people who accept responsibilities in the church -- sometimes thankless and difficult ones -- and show up week after week to fulfill them. I think of our Saturday morning office volunteers, our communion carriers, our Sunday morning nursery volunteers, our Sunday School teachers, our many gifted musicians, our Monday morning counters, our builders of baptismal boxes, our sound system volunteers, our ushers, our planning council leaders and the list goes on. It is good for our souls to be among people who accept responsibilities in the church -- sometimes thankless and difficult ones - and show up week after week to fulfill them.

It is good for our souls to be among people who quietly go about their business with family and jobs on the days between church services and do their best to be faithful, honest, and caring, whatever their duties are.

Our Stephen Ministers quietly go and visit with people during the week in fulfilling their calling to be faithful, honest, and caring.

It is good for our souls to be among people who respond with undeserved kindness to someone in need who unexpectedly happens across their path.

A good example was my being blessed last month to spend a morning at the Redeemer Lutheran Crisis Center with Mary O'Rourke, Carole Naumann and several retired teachers who had volunteered to give the Redeemer vacation Bible school staff a break as they were in their seventh week of eight straight weeks of V.B.S. Divinity through Mary provided all the supplies -- crayons, paper, balloons, etc. -- to teach the 60 some black, white, brown, and yellow children that they are all loved and equal in the eyes of God.

When I arrived that morning with my truck loaded to the top with old furniture and clothing that had been dropped off at Divinity, there were men waiting on the sidewalk to help me unload. One of them said to me, "that's a good looking truck." He was a man dressed in ragged clothes probably from donations, but had an air of dignity about him.

I responded, "Thank you. Her name is Dakota." He smiled as he tried to lift a wooden table over her tailgate. I asked, "Do you need any help?" Assuming he would say "yes."

He answered in three simple words that I haven't forgotten. We look for wisdom in great men and women. We expect it from those of higher learning and accomplishments. I expected nothing from this black man when his answer took me completely by surprise.

"Don't we all?" he said. "Do you need any help?" "Don't we all," he said.

After gathering with the women at Grumpy's for lunch to celebrate Carole's 75th birthday that day, I thought about his three words on the way home. No matter how much we have, no matter how much we've accomplished, we still need help. And like this man, no matter how little we have, no matter how weighed down we are with problems, we can still give help.

"Do you need any help?" "Don't we all?" He was a messenger sent by God to minister to me that day. It is good for our souls to be among people who keep striving to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

Whether we're in church or on the street, we find people much like ourselves who are working together to praise our God or to unload a truck to be faithful in things both great and small.

"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much." Why Church? Because we are real people who all need help and who can all help others. "Do you need any help?" "Don't we all?"

May the peace of God . . .