

## “Why Church?”

### 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 comers, 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. Certainly our new members are attracted to Divinity because they have found people here not that different from themselves.

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 could 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 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 when our Stephen Ministers and communion carriers quietly go and visit with people during the week in fulfilling their calling to be faithful, honest, and caring as Judy Jacobson has faithfully visited and communed Rita Dregalla over the years.

It is good for our souls to watch our children celebrate the anniversary of their baptisms and to welcome Leilani Dorko into the Lord’s family and to join with Dana in helping to raise her as a follower of Christ.

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

Every August, the women of the church at Zion Lutheran in Valley City, host a “This is your life” birthday party for the women in the church who turned 80 that year.

Last April, my mother was one of those women who turned 80 this year. Since my brother hasn’t stepped foot in a church in many years, I knew it would be up to me to present her story last month.

Fortunately, mom had kept a diary that I read in preparation. I was reminded of the deaths of her loved ones along the way. Her older brother died at 40 when a tractor he was driving tipped over on him on the side of a hill. Her younger sister died at 51 from brain cancer. Her father died at 69 and her husband at 67. She is the lone survivor from her generation but is now regressing from Alzheimer’s.

Mom was the primary caregiver for both her sister and later, her mother. I share with you a taste of what she experienced and what some of you have experienced as caregivers.

“My sister Rita is getting sicker with brain tumors. She will have seven surgeries trying to cut them out. Her husband, Kenny, is becoming a real bear. He can’t handle the situation. I sat with him along with their pastor and his wife through all the surgeries at Metro Hospital. After the seventh surgery, she lost her eyesight, and her husband kicked her out. She stayed in an apartment in Strongsville for awhile before moving in with us. He eventually allowed her to come home after he found a woman to help care for her.

Rita passed away a year before my mother. Hospice came into their home to care for her at the end. Doug gave the sermon at Mom’s funeral. He was wonderful (she’s my mom!)

He also helped at Rita's funeral. What sad days for all of us. I don't know how I would have gotten through these days without my faith."

"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 . . .

#692 – We Are an Offering