"Hypocrisy in the Church"
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"*Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and in truth*" (1 John 3:18).

Everyone knows that Jesus was nice. And everyone knows that people who claim to follow Jesus are *supposed* to be nice too, and being nice means being agreeable and cooperative and often quiet. Sometimes to be faithful, we cannot be that way. That's when the world gets angry at us, and says things like, "And you call yourself a Christian!" or "The church is just full of hypocrites!"

How are we to think about this? First, the world has not even the slightest authority to define for us what it looks like to follow Jesus. Jesus has done that for us and being nice doesn't seem to have been a high priority. Certainly, Jesus caused offence in the world. Therefore, if we are following Jesus, we will cause offense in the world. It's to be expected. Jesus said, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me first" (Jn. 15:18).

It's a temptation for every Christian to garner the love of the world by recasting our beliefs to be more tolerant and therefore more palatable to the world. But we should not give much thought to what the world thinks of us. What matters is the judgment of One. What matters is what God thinks. So, the question to ask is not whether the world thinks we are nice enough. The question is whether we who claim to follow Jesus are actually following Him.

Sometimes, we don't follow Jesus. We are sinful, broken people. I know I still have a long way to go before I live as Jesus lived, and you probably do too. Though our character can and should improve as Christians, we'll never be able to completely shake off the old sinful nature. It's who we are as human beings. It's our very nature. And here's the rub: people notice that about me. And they notice it about you. All they think to themselves: here's a person who claims to follow Jesus, but doesn't look like he's following Jesus. They seem to work with the assumption that once a person becomes a Christian, they shouldn't struggle with sin anymore. And so, they say, "The church is just *full* of hypocrites." That is, when you and I sin, we give people cause to reject Jesus. Seventy-two percent of people who don't go to church say one of the reasons is the hypocrisy of Christians.

Perhaps, then, a good response to the one who charges the church with hypocrisy is to say, "You know, you're right. There is hypocrisy in the church, and I too have been hypocritical. I've not followed Jesus perfectly. I've sinned against Him and His commandments." We can say this because it's the truth. We can also say this because we know God forgives us, right? We don't need to try to cover over our sin or fear confessing our sin, because Jesus has covered over our sin with his own righteousness. He's washed us with His forgiveness.

Moreover, the Bible says all people sin and fall short of the glory of God. So, the church is full of sinners because the world is full of sinners. In fact, the church is the one place in the world that in order to become a member, you must first acknowledge and confess you are indeed a poor, miserable sinner. The church can stomach liars and thieves and murderers and addicts, but what we cannot stomach is someone who claims to be without sin. That one doesn't belong. We don't want that one here. This place is for sinners and is full of sinners.

Anyway, since when do people allow hypocrisy to determine their affiliation and participation? Since there are sinners and hypocrites in Wisconsin, would they move to California to avoid them? (Good luck with that!) Since there are sinners and hypocrites who work for the Apple corporation, are they going to give up their I-phone? God's people are made up of sinners. Does that really mean they don't want to be a part of God's people?

For some, saying the church is full of hypocrites can be a cop-out. So long as the church is full of hypocrites, they don't have to bother coming for worship. They don't have to volunteer to teach Sunday School or give away their hard-earned money. Meanwhile, all the good that Christians do is completely wiped out with the charge that they're all hypocrites.

Moreover, one way people feel better about themselves is by tearing others down. In this way, everyone loves a hypocrite, and the more grievous the example, all the better. So, they build up in their minds a Hypocrites Hall of Shame. But they should not think for a moment that it will improve their chances before the judgment seat of God. As they say, God doesn't grade on a curve. Moreover, Jesus asked, "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye" (Mt. 7:3)?

One thing that feeds into the charge of hypocrisy is that we exclude those who are not of the same confession or faith.   The prevailing attitude today is that churches should be completely inclusive and shouldn't exclude anyone. But let's think about that.

Imagine that one of the board members for the Madison LBGTQ Advocacy Center announces, "I've been reading the Bible and have become convinced that being an active homosexual is not God-pleasing behavior." Imagine he persists in making that assertion on the board. Though that group has a reputation for being completely inclusive, will it also be inclusive of that dissenting voice? Of course, it won't. They'll ask him to leave. And that's ok. They're just being a like-minded community.

Similarly, churches should not be condemned for maintaining standards for membership in accord with their beliefs. Every community does. Show up at a gun-control meeting with a pistol on your right hip, and they'll ask you to hand in your keys and membership card. Take your newborn to a non-denominational church and ask them to baptize (not dedicate) but baptize your infant, and they say, "No thanks. We don't do that." They're not being exclusive. They're just being true to their beliefs.

Someone comes here and says, "Grandma expects me to commune, but I don't really believe any of that stuff about the body and blood" and I'll ask him to refrain from receiving communion. I'm not trying to be mean to him or to grandma. I'm just trying to be true to our beliefs.

Also feeding into the charge of hypocrisy is the idea that religion always leads to violence. We are still being condemned for what the crusaders did in the 11th century. I'm not sure what you and I, as Lutherans, in Watertown, 2022 had to do with all that. But the point people like to make is religion inevitably leads to persecution, war, and death.

But let's think about that. Communist regimes, such as in Russia and China rejected all religion and belief in God. They were devoutly secular societies, yet each produced massive violence against their own people without the influence of religion. Violence done in the name of Christianity is a terrible reality and there's no excusing it. But that pales in comparison to the more recent violence inspired by secularism.

People who are offended by hypocrisy in the church will often say, "I trust and believe in Jesus; I just don't need the church because it's full of hypocrites." But Jesus says you do need the church. It's part of the commandment to gather for worship on the Sabbath. You said you trust him. Do you trust him also on that?

Those who call us hypocrites, could it be they are also hypocrites? Anyone who lifts up a standard of ethics and then doesn't live according to it, is a hypocrite. An example: say a man believes it's important that we all reduce our carbon footprint. So, he reduces, reuses, recycles. He drives a Tesla, buys local, lives simply, and encourages others to do the same. But then he gets married, and he and his wife fly to Europe on a big fuel thirsty jet for the honeymoon. He's not living up to his standard of ethics. I think in one way or another, we're all hypocrites. There's no avoiding it.

Ruth Graham (wife of Billy Graham) was once confronted by a young college student from India. He said, "I would like to believe in Christ. We of India would like to believe in Christ. But we have never seen a Christian who was like Christ." Graham answered, "I am not offering you Christians. I am offering you Christ."

Christianity does not stand or fall on the way Christians have acted throughout history. Christianity stands on the sure foundation who is Jesus Christ, neither sinner nor hypocrite, but Savior. Absolutely pure, guiltless, and innocent, that Lamb of God went to the cross for us. He who knew no sin became sin for us. That means on the cross is the hypocritical One.   On the cross is the sinful One. We are saved by His death in our place, not by the behavior of Christians in the church. The sin and wickedness done by Christians does not invalidate Christ's redeeming death for us. Nor does it invalidate our faith. We worship the perfect Christ, not imperfect Christians.

Yes, there have been dark chapters in the church, and in your history and mine. There's no excusing them. But the answer is not to abandon the Christian faith. The answer is to cling to Him all the more and to His grace. When you fail to follow Him, don't pretend that you haven't failed. Instead, freely confess your sin and flee to Him who washes you clean with his blood. After all, it's His judgment of you that counts, not the devil or the world. They will always label you a sinner and a hypocrite.   That's ok. Those accusations are only going to get louder in the years to come. But their argument is with God, who has judged you innocent in Christ. In Holy Baptism, He has clothed you with His righteousness. In the Lord's Supper, He blots out your sin with His blood.

So, the church is a good place for you because it's a good place for all sinners. It's a good place for repentant liars and thieves and adulterers and misfits. Jesus said, "It's not the healthy who need a physician, but the sick" (Mk. 2:17). It's not the self-righteous who need the church, but sinners.

 "The church is just full of hypocrites!" Maybe so. But we're always glad to make room for one more. Amen.