



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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A Stephen Ministry Congregation
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Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 21, 2016

“And You Call Yourself a Christian!”

(1 John 3:18)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18).

COLLECT: Grant to us, Lord, the Spirit to think and do always such things as are right, that we, who cannot do anything that is good without You, may be enabled by You to live according to Your will; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Do you remember Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon? He was a real horror. He makes the tyrants of our age look like teddy bears. When King Zedekiah of Israel rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, he had his eyes plucked out – which anybody could have thought of – but the master-touch was just before this was done, he had Zedekiah’s sons killed before him so that in his blindness he’d have that last sight to live with the rest of his days.

Nebuchadnezzar had a ninety foot tall idol made and plated with gold. He commanded everybody to grovel at its feet . . . or else. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, faithful followers of Yahweh, they refused to play the part. So Nebuchadnezzar ordered them thrown into a fiery furnace. The king took his seat front and center to watch them burn, but it didn’t play out the way he thought it would. First, he could see there were four men in the furnace, not three, the fourth being an angel. And second, not one of them was even singed. Nebuchadnezzar was so taken by the miracle that he pardoned the men on the spot and proclaimed their God, Yahweh, as the only true God. But then he went one step further. He issued a new law to the effect that from that day forward, anybody not treating Yahweh with the highest respect was to be torn limb from limb and have his house burned down in that order. Presumably Yahweh was pleased by his conversion, but old Nebuchadnezzar still had a few rough edges to take care of, right? He was a work in progress (Daniel 3).

You and I are works in progress too, in spite of our Christian faith. Though we proclaim Christ, we still have the rough edges. The church is filled with immature and

broken people who still have a long way to go emotionally, morally, and spiritually. As the saying goes, “The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum of saints.” So as Lutherans we have an expression: *Simu justus et peccator*: We are saints and sinners simultaneously. Our character can and should improve as Christians, but we’ll never be able to completely shake off the old sinful nature, because it’s who we are as human beings. It’s our very nature. I not only commit sin, I am a sinner. And here’s the rub: people notice that about me. And they notice it about you. And they don’t know anything about Christians being saints and sinners simultaneously. All they know is 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 act hypocritically, we give people cause to reject Jesus. Seventy-two percent of people who don’t go to church say one of the reasons is hypocrisy.

Jesus once said to his followers, “You are the light of the world . . . Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 5:14ff). But many are not seeing our good works and glorifying God. They’re seeing our hypocrisy and distancing themselves from God and his church.

Of course you know that as a Christian, you have a bull’s eye on your back. You are a walking target for this charge of hypocrisy. And every one of us does things to contribute to the charge. Perhaps, then, the first 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 lived according to the standards I lift up. I’ve sinned against God 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 fear confessing sin, because Jesus has covered over our sin with his own righteousness.

But I think it's also important to point out there is a difference between a sinner and a hypocrite. Often, those two words are used interchangeably and that's not right. The Bible says all people sin and have fallen 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 have to 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 around here is anyone 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. (Every or is.) But it's not really fair to say the church is full of hypocrites . . . because we're not claiming to be anything other than sinners.

Anyway, since when do people allow hypocrisy to determine their affiliation and participation? Since there are hypocrites in Watertown, would you move to Chicago to try to avoid them? Since there are sinners and hypocrites who work the Apple corporation, are you all going to give up your I-phones? Some doctors are quacks. Does that mean you never see a doctor anymore? There are hypocrites among God's people. Does that mean you 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, then I don't have to set the alarm on Sunday morning. I don't have to attend any meetings on Monday nights. I don't have to give away my hard-earned money, or volunteer in the community. Meanwhile, all the good that Christians do is recklessly swept away with the charge that they're all hypocrites.

Moreover, one way people make themselves feel better is by tearing others down. In this way, everyone loves a hypocrite, and the more grievous the example, all the better, because they can use them to excuse their smaller transgressions and assuage their own guilt. They build up a Hypocrites Hall of Shame. But they shouldn't think for a

moment that that's going to improve their chances on the Last Day. As they say, God doesn't grade on a curve.

Moreover, one of the most fundamental teachings of Christ is that we should take our eyes off the sin of others, and concentrate on our own chronic need for forgiveness. In our Gospel lesson 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" (v.3)?

One thing that feeds into the charge of hypocrisy is that not just anyone can be a member of this church. We exclude those who don't share the same confession or faith. And that just seems so wrong from the outside looking in. The prevailing attitude today is that faith communities should be completely inclusive. They shouldn't exclude anyone.

But let's think about that. Imagine that one of the board members for the local LBGT Community Center announces, "I've been reading the Bible and praying and I now believe homosexuality is not God-pleasing behavior." As the weeks go by he persists in making that assertion on the board. Or imagine it goes the other way around. Imagine that a board member for the Alliance Against Same-Sex Marriage announces, "I discovered my son is gay and I've changed my mind and believe he has the right to marry his partner." No matter how personally gracious and flexible the members of each group are, the day will come when the board will say, "You're going to have to resign because you don't share a common commitment with us." The first of these communities has a reputation for being inclusive, and the second for being exclusive, but in practice, both of them operate in similar ways. Each of those communities has boundaries that will include some and exclude others. Neither community is being narrow or hypocritical. They're just being a community.

We should criticize Christians when they are condemning and being ungracious to unbelievers. But we should not criticize churches when they maintain standards

for membership in accord with their beliefs, because every community does.

Show up with a Bic Mac at a meeting that advocates a meatless diet out of respect for animals, and you'll be excluded.

Show up as a member of a gun-control meeting with pistol on your right hip, and they'll ask you to hand in our keys and membership card.

Show up with a "Feel the Bern" poster at a Trump rally, and you might get some quizzical looks.

Similarly, take your new born infant to a non-denominational church and ask them to baptize (not dedicate) but baptize your infant, and they'll tell you "no thanks. We don't do that." They're not being exclusive. They're just being true to their beliefs.

Come here and say, I don't really believe it's the body and blood of the Lord. It's just a symbol, and I'll ask you to refrain from receiving communion. I'm not being mean or exclusive. I'm just trying to be true to our beliefs.

What also feeds into charge of hypocrisy is the idea that religion always leads to violence. We are still being condemned for the Crusades, right, though I'm not sure what you and I, as Lutherans, in Watertown, 2016 had to do with all that. But the point people like to make is religion inevitably leads to war, violence and oppression of minorities.

There are problems with that view. Communist regimes in Russia, China and Cambodia 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. In the twentieth century, however, violence was inspired as much by secularism as by religion. Societies that rid themselves of all religion have been just as oppressive and violent as societies that are steeped in religion. We can only conclude what the Bible has been saying all along: there is some violent impulse so deeply rooted in the human heart

that it expresses itself regardless of whether the society is religious or irreligious.

What about religious zealots or fanatics? Think of people you consider very religious in the worst ways. They're religiously overbearing, self-righteous, judgmental, insensitive, and harsh. The problem is not that they are too Christian, but that they're not Christian enough. They are zealous and courageous, but not humble, not loving, not understanding, not compassionate, or forgiving or wise, as Christ was. They emulate the Jesus of the whips in the temple, but not the Jesus who said, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" (John 8:7). The antidote to fanatical Christians is not to tone down their faith, but rather to help them grasp a fuller and truer faith in Christ.

People 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. You said you trust him. Do you trust him also on that? Jesus kept the Sabbath and commanded us to do so. He commanded us to gather together for worship. So who are you going to follow, the Jesus you say you trust, or the proud impulse that says you don't need to hypocritical church to be a Christian?

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 named Robert believes it's important that we all reduce our carbon footprint. So he reduces, reuses, recycles. He drives a Prius and buys local and lives simply and politically advocates that others should do the same. But then he gets engaged and his fiancée really wants to go to Hawaii for the honeymoon. Robert thinks about that big fuel thirsty jet, and he thinks about his fiancée, and he concludes he's built up some personal carbon credits, and can afford to indulge. I'm not saying flying to Hawaii is wrong. It's just not living up to the standard of ethics that Robert espouses. I think in one way or another, we're all hypocrites. There's no avoiding it.

The Good News is 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 and innocent, that Lamb of God went to the cross for us. We are saved by Christ's death on the cross, not by the performance of Christians in the church. The sin and wickedness done by Christians does not invalidate the Christian faith or Christ's redeeming death. We worship the perfect Christ, not imperfect Christians. Yes, there have been really dark chapters in the history of the Christian church, and there's no excusing them. But the answer is not to abandon the Christian faith. The answer is to move to a fuller and deeper understanding of the One we follow, and cling to his grace for dear life.

That is, when you fail to follow him, don't pretend that you didn't fail. Instead, run to the cross. Flee to the Savior who washes you clean with his blood. After all, it's his judgment of you that counts. The devil and the world have and will always label us as sinners and hypocrites. That noise is only going to get louder in the years to come. But their argument is with God who has judged us innocent in Christ and has gathered us into his church and around this altar where he locates himself for us in the bread and wine to forgive us of all our sin.

So the church is a good place for hypocrites. It's a good place for liars too, and thieves and adulterers and murderers 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 move over and make room for one more. Amen.