

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**  
**SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
**REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON**  
**“WHY CHURCH? REASON TWO: REAL PEOPLE”**  
**LUKE 16:1-13**  
**September 19, 2010**  
**9:00 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

As we pointed out last week, some people prefer a wide array of other activities on Sunday mornings instead of attending church.

But you might be surprised to learn that the single biggest reason research shows for why people say they don't go to church is hypocrisy. Yes, hypocrisy! Well, let me assure you that hypocrisy in the church is mostly a myth. Nevertheless, according to *UnChristian*, a book based on surveys done by the Barna Research Group, among people with no religious affiliation in the 16- to 29-year-old bracket, 85 percent say one reason they don't go to church is because Christians are hypocritical. What an easy dodge, that one word; hypocrisy.

This sermon or anything else we may say probably won't change anyone's mind. But I must admit, there's a kind of truth to what they're claiming. If you're looking for a group of people who always live up to their highest values and who never say one thing and do another, you'll going to have to look elsewhere — though I doubt you'll find a group of any sort totally free of inconsistency anywhere on this planet. Although it can be a healthy thing to acknowledge the contradictions between our profession of faith and our daily actions, it's also useful to qualify our confession a bit.

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, he spoke about people who gave to charity “*so that they may be praised by others*” (Matthew 6:2). Likewise, he 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*” (v. 5). He also chided the scribes and Pharisees for putting on appearances, saying, “*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” (Matthew 23:27).* Jesus called all of those people hypocrites.

I would venture to say that there are very few people here in this church who get up on Sunday morning thinking, **“I’m going to go to church so I can pretend to be righteous and appear to be holy”**.

No, when people in the church admit to being hypocrites what they are saying is that they failed to follow through on their good intentions or that they can still see the gap between the people they feel called to be and the people they actually are. But they aren’t trying to deceive anybody; they’re seeing where they still need to work to bring their behavior up to the level of what they really believe.

To get some perspective on this, we can look at the history of our own church. There are people here who have heard the complaint that Christians are hypocritical.

But the truth is revealing. While they may have heard the hypocrisy charge from people outside the church, they have hardly ever heard of anybody who has actually left this congregation to say they were doing so because of hypocrites. More often, the explanation for a decision to depart was centered around what they perceived as somebody’s failing: 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 his/her sexual orientation) or they had a small issue that was never addressed, which, after a lengthy period of festering, had become an irreparable riff.

Now the real reason some people leave a church is because of not feeling **“fed”** by the sermons, or because they are disappointed that the pastor didn’t agree with them. But I have yet to meet anyone who has said they left because of hypocrisy in the church.

Be that as it may, there are still people out there who hold onto that perception. No matter what I say or what you do there will be those who will insist that the church is full of hypocrites. Nevertheless, let me point out that, where as the

perception is real, perceptions aren't necessarily the same as realities.

When someone who is outside of the church has no intention of coming in, it's easy for him or her to say it's because of hypocrisy. And because there are some gaps between our best intentions and our follow-through, such persons can no doubt find an example of inconsistency in our behavior. But those of us who are inside the church are more likely to see those gaps differently.

In other words, if you really get involved with the members of this congregation, you are less likely to see problems here in this church in terms of hypocrisy and more in terms of human failure. And when one is talking about human failure, it's easier to include oneself in that category. In fact, there are many people who stay in the church because they see the church as the place where we're called to follow Christ Just as we are.

**Just as I am, without one plea,  
But that Thy blood was shed for me,  
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.**

**Just as I am, and waiting not  
To rid my soul of one dark blot,  
To Thee whose blood can cleanse each spot,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.**

One good reason to come to church is because it puts us in company with real people who also see that gap between their profession and practice, and care enough to want to narrow it; they want to be better people. When you come here to worship you are going to find people who very much like you; people who are on the same faith journeys you are on.

Of course, every church does have its share of wing nuts and disordered personalities and perhaps even some real hypocrites. But those terms don't describe the people you see sitting in this congregation. I can assure you that for most of the people who gather here a description Jesus gave in our reading is more on point.

It is Jesus' parable of the dishonest manager, a guy who's such an outright rascal that we would never point to him as a model member of Park Hill. We can't call him a hypocrite because he doesn't appear worried that he isn't living up to a call from God. He's simply looking out for his own hide, and he's quite straightforward about it. Still, his employer, whom he is cheating out of expected income, can't help but be impressed by his resourcefulness. We can admire his cleverness, but we don't do church with the hope of finding people like him as our Christian models. Quite to the contrary!

Listen to what Jesus says, ***“Whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.”*** Clear enough. And listen to what else Jesus says, ***“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much”.***

Why Church? Because it is good for our souls to be among people who are 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 still show up week after week to fulfill them.
- It is good for our souls to be among people who quietly go about their business on the days between church services and do their best to be faithful, honest and caring, whatever their duties are.
- It is good for our souls to be among people who respond with unwarranted kindness to someone in need who unexpectedly happens across their path.

Let me share this with you: It's a true story about the real people here in our congregation. I received a call from the Denver Children's Home informing me that they had toys to give away for Christmas to families that could not afford to buy them. They wanted to use our church as a distribution point. This is a story of a sermon played out around the perimeter of our church, not preached from the pulpit.

The date was Saturday, December 20, 2008. The temperature outside was 8 degrees Fahrenheit. Families started arriving at 7:30 a.m. The toy distribution didn't start until 1 pm. By that time, there were so many people circling the church and waiting in the cold that the Denver Police Department had to come and manage the crowd. When members of our staff arrived they went and asked the organizers if the families could come into the sanctuary and sit where it was warm. They were told, “**No**” because they had a certain way of doing things and did not want to create any confusion.

Lauren , a member of our staff gave two bags of clothes to some ladies standing in line. It just so happened that this was the very day for the rehearsal of the Children's Cantata. People stood in line for hours and not a single person complained. Kerry Mason went home and brought back some Mountain Man Nut and Fruit Company cakes for everyone in line. Dawn Givens and others went down stairs in the kitchen and made hot coffee and hot chocolate and wheeled it out to all of those in line. The people were very gracious and at the end of the day every person in line received a toy.

That is a dramatic example of how real people are working to be faithful in their witness as Christian disciples. And that can inspire us to continue working to be disciples as well. In fact, Jesus gave us a good description of what the Christian life should be: working at being faithful in little things so we can also be faithful in big things.

If you are willing to let your light shine, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.