

When Christians Are UnChristian

Part 1 of 4 in the series, *When Christians Get It Wrong*
Matthew 23:1-12 – September 12, 2010 – Browns Point UMC
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The idea for this series comes from a book written recently by the Rev. Adam Hamilton, pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in suburban Kansas City, MO. In 1990, when Rev. Hamilton was 26 years old, he planted that church with no property and no building, meeting in a funeral home chapel with fewer members than you can count on one hand. Today that church has the largest weekend attendance of any United Methodist congregation in the country and a membership of about 17,000 people, meeting in 9 regular weekend worship services on 3 campuses.

A few years ago, a young man came into Rev. Hamilton's office and expressed all the very thoughtful reasons that he did not want to be a part of the Christian faith—they all had to do with the way Christians behave – and Rev. Hamilton had little defense against any of his reasons, because he knew through his own experience that they were true. So he started surveying other people, and he found the same answers again and again: people were not staying away from church because they didn't understand Trinitarian theology or because they didn't want to live upstanding moral lives or associate themselves with an ancient institution. They were staying away from church because they didn't want to be associated with Christians.

That's a tough thing to hear, especially as someone who has given her whole life to the making of disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world *through the church*. So when I heard this, and when I read the book that Rev. Hamilton wrote in response, I thought we *had* to talk about it. The accusations that these people made sounded *very* familiar to me, and I realized I couldn't refute them— and that sometimes I haven't wanted to associate with Christians (including myself), either. So I want us to explore this series together, with two hopes: 1.) that perhaps some wounds can begin to heal, and these conversations might open up avenues of possibility with those who have been hurt or alienated by the church; and 2.) that these conversations might help us to examine our own attitudes, actions, and beliefs so that we might be more aware of how we are living in the world and what difference it makes to those who might be considering Christ.

I should say, first, though, that this is not an accusatory series, it's a confessional series. I am not here to say to all of you in the congregation: *you* have done it wrong and turned people away. Nor are we, as a congregation, here to say, *all those other churches that look different from us* have done it wrong and turned people away. This is not about pointing fingers. We're here to confess that none of us have achieved perfection in our faith. All of us have made mistakes in our Christian lives, by things we have done and things we have left undone. And all of us are called to do better, so that rather than others being skeptical of our faith or totally turned off by it, they'll be drawn in to the love that we share and experience in the God of grace and mercy. So again, this is not a series championing Browns Point United Methodist Church as the model of "right" Christianity in comparison to anyone else, nor is it about me saying I am a model Christian. When I say Christians have gotten things wrong, I include all of us. And that is why we will pray a prayer of confession each week of this series as part of our prayer time together.

So today we will do some introductory work. Then next week we'll talk about when Christians act out of fear; then we'll discuss when Christians put rules before people; and then

finally on the first Sunday of October, we'll paint the picture of what it looks like when Christians get it right, when we live out the gospel that has been gifted to us. I hope throughout these four weeks you will share stories with one another – stories of when Christians have gotten it wrong, and stories of when Christians have gotten it right, so that we can learn from one another, be inspired by each other, and move forward together into the future God has prepared for us.

Now, this is not a new topic: Christians have been “getting it wrong” since before anyone was called Christian. Jesus had to deal with things similar to what we're talking about all through the gospels, and we heard a great example of it in what Barb read today: the scribes and the Pharisees did not practice what they preached and they were turning people away. They did their deeds to be seen by others and misunderstood the call of their faith, exalting themselves when they were called to humility. “You think you're doing so great,” Jesus says, “but woe to you: you've got it all wrong.”

They didn't do it *intentionally*, I don't think – I don't think they *meant* to turn people away. But I'm willing to bet that they didn't stop often or long enough to truthfully evaluate their actions and beliefs and make sure they were accurately representing the God they intended to serve. In the same way, I don't think we Christians, when we get it so wrong that we actually turn people away from the gospel of Jesus Christ by our hypocrisy and judgement – I don't think people *mean* to do this. Their intentions are usually *good*. I know I don't *mean* to when I act in ways that are decidedly unChristian. But that's why it's so important to take time to look carefully at our beliefs and our actions and commit ourselves again and again to lives of humility and compassion.

You all know the stories I'm talking about, of when Christians get it wrong: It's the teenage boy who goes to his pastor and says, “I'm gay,” and the pastor's response, instead of, “God loves you,” is “we'll get you fixed.” It's the girl who goes to church with a friend and is told she's going to hell because she hasn't had a conversion experience. It's the man who's ignored when he tries to reconcile his scientific education with what's in the Bible. It's the woman who's snickered at because her clothes are not what we'd call ‘Sunday best.’ It's the congregation torn apart by petty arguments over carpet colors. It's the church that delivers messages of hatred and exclusion, proclaiming to the world that Christians are merciless, hard-hearted people. We could go on and on talking of how people have come to the church with a genuine desire to grow in their relationship with God and have been turned away by Christians themselves. Maybe have *lived* one of those stories, and it's only by the grace of God that you've found your way here right now. Maybe you were looking for community, and found petty, selfish, mean-spirited, judgmental people. Maybe they all seemed so focused on fixing you that they couldn't see their own grievous faults. Maybe they were so focused on the minutiae of their religion that they failed to reach out to you in love; and so while you wanted to grow in your relationship with God, you thought you might do it better on your own.

I don't want that to happen anymore – not at Browns Point – and not anywhere. Our job is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, and I believe that if we live as humble followers of the living God, not only will others be drawn toward the grace and love accessible here, but we will take part in that transformation.

The main criticism Jesus has of the Pharisees is the main word that we hear when asking people why they've given up on the church: “hypocrites.” In Greek the word translated ‘hypocrite’ means ‘actor,’ like an actor in a play. The Pharisees were acting the part of religious people, but they had not let their religion develop into faith, and they had not let their faith change the way they lived their daily lives. They constantly judged others but didn't seem to notice that they

neglected to practice justice, mercy, or compassion. They participated in religion to be seen, but their hearts were not in it. They understood how to do religious things, but they didn't know how to be people of faith. They looked for honor, recognition, and attention while God called them to lives of humility and generosity.

We Christians are like this too much of the time. We are actors in a religious play. Our motives are off, our pride is drowning our compassion, our religiosity has us missing the heart of the gospel, and we've yet to let our faith change our lives. We are judgmental, hypocritical, and insensitive, acting in ways that are *un*Christian. No one reasonably expects Christians to be perfect people, of course, but we must take time to truthfully evaluate our actions, to admit our faults, and to commit to changing ourselves so that people are never again turned away from the Christian faith because of us – and instead they are drawn in to what 1 Timothy calls “the life that really is life.”

Our challenge is to be Christians who get it right, who live out lives of humility and compassion, loving others as Jesus loved and opening the door wide to those we are called to serve. We are called to be people of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, generosity, faithfulness, and self-control, what Paul calls “the fruits of the Spirit.” We are called to this task, to take this *seriously*, because lives depend on it – our lives and the lives of those we aim to serve.

The good news is that we have everything we need to be faithful in this endeavor. We already have what we need to be Christians who draw others in to the love and grace of the God of all creation. We may not be there yet, but God has offered us a vision of who we were created to be, and together we can pursue that kind of godliness. Together, you and I can learn what it is to get it right, at least some of the time, and to admit our faults when we get it wrong. Together we will not be perfect, but we can be honest and genuine and real as we grow toward holiness. And that's all anyone can ask.