

THE CHURCH IS FULL OF HYPOCRITES!

I've heard the comment frequently; in fact, only a few days ago I read it while I was scanning my Twitter account for the latest news.

"The church is full of hypocrites."

Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu who organized and led protests that helped to free India from British colonialism, was once asked what he thought about Christianity. After all, his non-violent tactics seemed very similar to Jesus' way of doing things. Gandhi replied, "I like your Christ; I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

That stings, doesn't it? I mean, after all, it's us—it's me and you—that Gandhi was talking about when he said Christians are so unlike Christ.

So, do you believe it? Do you think it's true?

I remember reading a Dear Abby column a number of years back, and someone wrote to complain about the seeming shortage of Christians in Christian churches. I really liked Abby's response. She wrote words to the effect that churches aren't so much mansions for saints as they are hospitals for sinners. I think Abby was onto something.

I love this church. I love this congregation, and very much enjoy being your pastor. But let's face it, our church—and all churches for that matter—are very much human institutions, hospitals for sinners, and you can find the same kind of flaws and weaknesses in them that any human organization has. That's because churches are made up of ordinary women and ordinary men trying their best to be faithful to Christ and get along with one another despite the many different personalities and opinions and beliefs that exist among them.

I'm a pastor, called by God to preach the Word, to point people toward eternity. Yet, as a pastor, I'm also a leader, a manager, an administrator of a very worldly, fallible institution called "the church." The Apostle Paul called the church the "Body of Christ;" but at the same time the church is also a thoroughly human body, with all the aches and pains and imperfections of any human body.

Jesus himself recognized this, and you have to give him credit for being realistic. Although he had some wonderful things to say about the church, calling us "salt" for the world and "light" in the darkness, he never tried to smooth over or deny the problems that can occur within Christian

congregations.

In this morning's Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus didn't say, "if the people in your church happen to have disagreements" No, Jesus laid all the cards down on the table when he said, "There will be disagreements, there will be hurts and wrongs committed in the church. And when that happens, you are to care enough about your sister or brother to respond in love and make every effort to set things right."

I don't know about you, but this morning's Scripture reading is very relevant to me as a pastor and a member of Christ's Body. You see, sometimes I've found myself thinking, "I wish we could get beyond all the squabbles and disagreements and meetings and get on with the real business of the church."

But this morning's reading from Matthew got me thinking that maybe learning to get along with each other despite our personal opinions, beliefs and ideas of how things should be run; and doing everything in our power to settle the disputes we have in a Christ-like way, is the real business of the church. Maybe one of the main reasons Christ created the church was for it to help guide and inspire the world to get along with one another, settle disputes amicably, and live peacefully and respectfully with one another.

The easiest thing to do, of course, would be to sweep our differences under the carpet, put a rosy smile on our faces and deny any disagreements. "Everything is fine. Nothing to see here. Move along now." But our Lord commands us to gently deal with one another and bring our disagreements, conflicts and quibbles out in the open and deal with them, so we can work toward the ultimate goal of grace, forgiveness and reconciliation.

I think Jesus strongly insists that we do this because a great deal is at stake: and that would be nothing less than the health and survival of the Body of Christ in the world.

Here's a thought. Maybe the time and energy many of us spend here in our faith community, serving on committees and giving of ourselves and our gifts in various ways, maybe that's more than simply participating in a volunteer organization we call church. Maybe, just maybe, our labor here is actually heavenly labor that's slowly and gradually changing the world, transforming it into God's kingdom, one heart, one mind, one person at a time, through acts of kindness, grace and reconciliation.

"The church is full of hypocrites."

Ouch! Perhaps there have been and will be times when that's more true than we care to admit, and we're guilty as charged. But on the other hand, even if someone claims that we in the church aren't being very good disciples, and definitely aren't the sinless people we'd like to be, we could respond that if

Jesus Christ was willing to go to the cross for a bunch of imperfect disciples and failures like us, well, than there's more than enough hope for you, too! So come on in and join us in our efforts to see Jesus more clearly, love Jesus more dearly, and follow Jesus more nearly, day by day.

In the book of Revelation, that sorely misunderstood final book of the Bible, it says that heaven is a great choir, constantly and unceasingly worshipping, praising and glorifying God. Well, guess what? If heaven is a choir, that must mean our time here on this earth is choir rehearsal!

Isn't that a great metaphor for the church: we're like choir members, rehearsing for our grand performance of singing praises and giving glory to God for all eternity! Everybody realizes that no solo, as beautiful as it may be, can truly equal an anthem by the whole choir; and no anthem is quite as good as a hymn sung by the entire congregation. So God has called us together as a community because our combined voices exalt and honor God more fully than any of our voices alone can do. But if the choir is to be well prepared, each member of it has to cooperate and coordinate and learn to synchronize and harmonize with one another. In other words, we the church need to get along.

My friends, the work we do as Christians and as a church is a witness, a tangible sign here on earth that God's glorious reign is coming. But surprise! That coming, promised realm is already present, at least in its early and still developing form; and it's hinted at and can be glimpsed through us, the church! The church exists to show the world what the kingdom of God looks like, and draw others to it; and that happens whenever and wherever we live as citizens of God's kingdom here on earth, and give the world a little taste of God's realm.

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Maybe. But I believe the church is just as full—and even more full of other kinds of people: let's call them Kingdom people. Let me offer you an example of that.

A woman named Helen Colella shared how a church came together to help her ailing mother. Helen wrote, "I lived 1,700 miles away from Mom. My young family also needed attention, so I could only manage to visit my mother just for a week to ten days every month. Her respiratory condition worsened. Oxygen, special medication and bed rest became standard, daily procedures for her, while fatigue, stress and financial difficulties were a regular part of mine. But I promised myself I would try to do what was necessary for my mother, for as long as it took.

"My mother often complained about being housebound and unable to do all the activities she once took for granted. 'I can't go shopping. I can't visit my neighbors. I can't even go to church.' This lack of independence caused her to

sink into a state of depression. In a short span of time it was obvious that her mental health had deteriorated, and I was very worried about her.

“But on one visit I asked, ‘How are you getting along when I’m not here?’

“She replied, ‘Oh, I don’t need much these days. But when I do, members of my church family come by and help me.’

“‘What do they do for you?’”

“‘One of them tidies up the house up and brings me treats; another shops for my groceries; and someone else comes by every day to make me a cup of tea and keep me up to date on the latest gossip.’”

“Smiling I said, ‘They sound like very nice people.’

“Mom’s face beamed and she nodded her head.

“When I was at my mother’s house on another visit, one of the members of her church family, a woman named Gen, arrived at the door with two home-cooked meals. ‘Your mother told me you were coming and I had a little extra,’ she said to me. ‘I thought you two girls might enjoy not having to cook tonight.’

“Gen stayed and visited with me after Mom turned in for the night. I got the low-down on whose children were engaged, getting married, and having babies, along with recent deaths and all the new activities at the church. I really appreciated her generosity and company, and I thanked her profusely for caring for Mom.

“She smiled. ‘It’s my pleasure. Living right upstairs makes it as easy as can be.’

“‘Mom can be stubborn. I’m surprised she agreed to let you help her.’

“‘We’ve been friends for a long time,’ Gen said, ‘so once we worked out a few problems, everything fell into place. Now it’s routine.’

“My stomach tightened. I asked, ‘What kind of problems?’

“‘I guess it started the day the washing machine overflowed,’ she said. ‘I knew she didn’t follow directions. So, since she doesn’t have much laundry, I asked if I could wash a few things of my own in her machine using a special low-suds cleaning product. Your mom was delighted. Now it’s a regular routine, and we’ve never had another flood.’

“‘Was there any damage to the house?’” I asked. Gen shook her head. But my relief lasted only a few seconds when I saw her brow furrow. ‘Was there something else?’

“‘Well, there was the afternoon I stopped in for tea.’ She closed her eyes and made the sign of the cross. ‘The minute I walked in I smelled gas. It seems your mother went to make a cup of tea, couldn’t light the burner and walked away, forgetting to turn the knob tack to its off position.’

“I gasped at the thought of the explosion.

“I turned off the gas, opened the windows to air out the apartment, and then told her I got a new supply of imported teas from England and hoped she would help me enjoy them. I promised her I would come every afternoon. Your mother was thrilled. Now she waits for me to make the tea. She says I have a special touch.’ Gen smiled. ‘And I’ve never smelled gas since.’

“I said a silent prayer of thanks.”

Gen leaned in close and patted my hand. “Did you know she’s not fond of the Meals on Wheels food selections?’ Before I could answer she continued. ‘Your mom took it upon herself to sleep through the delivery time. I told her I loved their food and made a deal with her to swap it for some of my cooking. We switch all the time now and she’s not losing any more weight.’

“How I missed these potential danger signs baffled me. I pointed to Mom’s multi-colored medication containers on the kitchen counter. ‘Was that your idea, too?’

“Gen nodded and said, ‘I convinced her that a different color pill-box for each day makes taking medicine a little more fun. Once we matched a day with a certain color, there were no more mistakes.’

“I realized that some of the people at my mother’s church were doing much more than simply caring for her. They were angels who were showing Mom friendship and love and helping her to keep her dignity when she needed it most.”

“The church is full of hypocrites?”

Well, I guess that might be true to some extent. But many others are like Gen, whose actions are nothing less than a display of the realm and reign of God.

This morning we’ve gathered together to catch a glimpse of a great mystery. We, yes us poor old, not-always-faithful, at times messed up, occasionally bickering, hung up on trivial matters people, we’re the form that Christ has chosen to take in our world. Pretty wild, huh? And it means that whenever we make efforts to get along with each other, when we make peace with one another after a biting argument, and when we pitch in and do our part to preserve the church for future generations, we’re engaged in holy, kingdom of God work. And through us Jesus is at work in the world, and his light shines in the darkness.

That’s what the church is all about, with or without hypocrites in it. And if Jesus is willing to work with us, as fallible and imperfect as we are, let us and our church respond by continuing to do all we can and make every effort to work with each other. Amen.