

“When Christians Get It Wrong”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson – Isaiah 60:1-6 New Testament Lesson – Luke 15:1-7

Jane McAlister Pope, writing in The Charlotte Observer newspaper, reminisces, saying, “Like many, I was raised in a church but stopped going during college. ... In my late 20s, though, I found my way back to church – and my only regret is not having done so sooner. ... Come to church and ... see the best and worst of human behavior,” she says. “You are probably certain that the church is a hotbed of hypocrisy, and you’re right. It’s an excellent place to find greed, pride, lust and any other sin known to man.

That’s because the church is made up of – surprise! – imperfect human beings. (The next big surprise: You’re one, too.) But imperfection,” says Pope, “is not necessarily a bad thing. When our rough, flawed personalities rub together, the friction makes heat, but also polishes. If we tough it out together, we all come out shining. And you’re likely, too, to see demonstrations of human nature at its best, as churchgoers try (again, imperfectly) to imitate the radical love, compassion and sacrifice of Jesus.”¹

Today, we begin a four-part sermon series titled “When Christians Get it Wrong.” Over the next four Sundays, we’ll look at four different trouble areas that actually arise within the Christian faith. The first trouble area and the one we’ll focus on today is thinking that Christians are supposed to somehow be better or holier than people who don’t go to church.

The Pharisees in today’s New Testament lesson seem to think this, don’t they? When they see tax-collectors and sinners among Jesus’ followers, the Pharisees begin to grumble, saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

And in response, Jesus tells a parable – the Parable of the Lost Sheep, saying, “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.” This statement is the exact opposite of what the Pharisees would expect. A learned Rabi such as Jesus should naturally give higher status to those who remain righteous.² That’s what the Pharisees think,

¹ Jane McAlister Pope, Come to church and join the dance, The Charlotte Observer, August 10, 2000.

And yet Jesus didn't do that—he put all his energy into helping the sinner, and left the “righteous” to fend for themselves. And that's just not how we think it's supposed to work in our society. In our society, we tend to give favored status to someone who has never stolen or cheated or lied, someone who wouldn't think of bullying or fighting, someone who has never succumbed to the temptations of sex or drugs or alcohol, or any lesser temptation you might think of.

And Jesus is saying that God takes greater joy in the salvation of someone with such addictions and struggles and failings; and that someone who “needs no repentance” isn't really that much of a focus of God's concern the focus of God's concern.

It's like what Jesus says earlier in Luke, at Chapter 5 (vv 31-32), where he says, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but (rather) those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

Well, if that's true – if Jesus has indeed been sent to save sinners, what about those who are righteous – those who attend worship, study the Bible, say their prayers, give to the poor, and volunteer (or minister) through the church? Doesn't God care about them?

The good news of the Gospel is, yes, God cares about them, because even people who do all those things fall short of righteousness in the sight of God. As it says in Ecclesiastes (7:20), “Surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning.”

And in Romans (3:10) it says, “There is no one who is righteous, not even one.” And then there's this from the poet and modern-day prophet Bob Dylan: his song titled “There Ain't No Man Righteous, No Not One.”³

And sometimes, we forget that. The biggest thing Christians get wrong is forgetting that, as the Psalmist (51:17b) says, “A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” But do we approach God – and our fellow human beings – with a broken, humble, and contrite heart, asking for God's help to change us?

Or do we come before God and others with excuses, or pride, or self-righteousness, certain that everything's just fine with us, we don't need God's help, at least not near as much as the next guy – anything we've fallen short on – well, we deserve a pass, don't we, God?

² Schweizer, Eduard, *The Good News According to Luke*, David E. Green translator, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1973, pp 244-45.

³ <http://www.metrolyrics.com/aint-no-man-righteous-no-not-one-lyrics-bob-dylan.html>

A novelist was researching a book about life in New England in the early 1900s. As part of his investigations, he visited the local cemetery. The writer noted with interest that nearly every tombstone from that era bore a final epitaph. Unfailingly, these were words of praise for the departed, with references such as "kind," "generous," "upstanding," "loving" and "faithful" appearing again and again. And this prompted the researcher to ask, "I wonder where they buried the sinners?"

Sometimes we forget that we are in fact flawed human beings, sinners. Sometimes we get so focused on our Christian ideals that *we deny our human brokenness*. And when we do, we wander into the trouble area of thinking that when Christians get it wrong, there's something wrong with the church, or with them, or with the world we live in, when the truth is that every living, breathing human being – Christian or not – does by definition get it wrong. We're only human.

And that's why we need the church, to help us remember that being a self-aware and repentant sinner, someone who turns back from their misguided ways is more pleasing to God than being a self-righteous denier, someone who can't live with his or her own shortcomings, not to mention the shortcomings of the person sitting next to you.

Sometimes Christianity leads otherwise good and God-loving churchgoers to think they're better than everybody else. Or more often, we as individuals know that we're not better than anybody else, but as Christians we think we're supposed to be, that we're supposed to work on ourselves until we finally are better than the next person.

Or, for those who have difficulty with organized religion and church attendance, many of these folks think that's what we think – that we're better than other people – when in fact, we don't think that at all.

Three ways of being: self-righteous, self-critical, or critical of others. The church, just like anywhere else, is full of all three types of people. And the good news about that is that's just the way it's supposed to be.

Church is not a hotel for saints; it's a hospital for sinners. And anybody who tells you different, well, they're in the right place. They're in need Jesus' wisdom and healing and acceptance, just like the next person – just like you, and me.

That's what we come to church for – to learn how to be better people; to receive the healing, redemptive touch of Jesus, through the Living Word of Jesus Christ that makes spiritual and emotional healing possible; and we come to church to be embraced just the way we are, as the people we are – with all our weaknesses and faults – embraced and lifted up in the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When Christians get it wrong, God rejoices. God rejoices because getting it wrong and owning it is the first step in becoming a Christian, of drawing closer to Jesus. A Christian by definition is someone who knows he or she falls short, someone who participates in a community of faith, a group of other Christians – maybe your Sunday school class or Bible group or volunteer team, or whoever you can rely on to lead you and each other back from the wilderness – again and again – whenever we go astray. Which we do, all the time, go astray.

“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep (or let’s say two or three dogs or cats or whatever) and losing one of them, (which one of you) does not leave the (others) in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” And “when he has found it,” says Jesus, “he lays it on his shoulders (he raises it up and carries it and relieves its burden) and rejoices.”

When it’s a Christian who gets it wrong, God rejoices because God knows that person is open to Jesus Christ taking the lead, in prayer, and through scripture, and by active participation in a community of faith.

I like to think of it the way that writer Stormie Omartian does. Stormie Omartian is the best-selling author of *The Power of a Praying Wife*. She writes that her favorite three-word prayer is “Change him, Lord.” Problem is, God never seems to answer this prayer, so she has learned to begin with a different prayer, “Lord, change me.” She believes that God has to start somewhere, so God will begin with the person who makes herself available, himself available.

Do you make yourself available to God – do I – available for God to change us for the better, knowing that we fall short everyday? This is the question – the quest – of each and every Christian – to everyday, in humility, be aware of our own failings and limitations and be open to God’s joyous, healing and redemptive power to change us for the better, If we make an effort to make ourselves available to God, with humility and honesty.

Do you? Do I? And if not, am I – are you – willing to change that to do whatever it takes, to make ourselves available to God’s desire and power to raise us up – as better people – if just a little, each day?
Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, most gentle example, most patient friend, most perfect model, most gentle guide, most loving helper, you are the faultless standard of faithfulness and the complete example of humanity.

Grant that we may so know you, so love you, so walk in your ways that you walk with us.

Compassionate God, you are always patient with us, always forgiving, and ever-near to listen and encourage, you are the light and guide for our living.

Set before us now your example of pure faith, complete trust, total devotion and your peacemaking ways.

You are the light, so shine in us. You are life, so live in us. You are joy, so rejoice in us. You are love, so empower us to love.

In Jesus Christ, who taught to us the Lord's Prayer, that we might raise it in song together, singing:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.