

Jumpin through the Hoops
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Geneseo United Methodist Church
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Matthew 23:15 ¹⁵ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

In this passage Jesus is talking to the people who were considered most holy in his day, and he cuts them no slack. He jumps right to the point and calls them hypocrites. Therefore, I thought it would be fun to make it a little more modern, and to start off this morning with the top seven you might be a hypocrite list.

Top Seven: You might be a Hypocrite lines.

1. If your attendance at church depends on what time your kids wake you up. . .
2. If you think church is only open for Baptisms, Weddings, and Funerals. . .
3. If you tell someone they should go to church, but cant remember the name of the church you attend. . .
4. If you have a Bible on your nightstand somewhere under a stack of (those) magazines. . .
5. If you consider the sermon nap time. . .
6. If you think a Tithe is something you wear, and the offering plate is a good place to empty out your spare change. . .
7. If you consider the communion wine the first shot of Saturday night. . .

Ok, that was fun, but it is also scary to say there are people who fit into that list. For a lot of people being a Christian is more about the image and what people see than about who we really are.

For the Jews it had all been about following the law; obey the laws and offer the right sacrifice at the right time and they thought they were good.

Our understanding of Christianity today has become very similar to what it was in Jesus day, follow a set of rules and youre good. Do the right thing, and you get a free pass to heaven. Tell me if these concepts sound familiar?

1. Sit through a boring church service a couple times a year, and youre good.
2. Do the sign of the cross, Go to confessional, say the Hail Mary, take communion youre good
3. Serve food at a local shelter or build a habitat house, and youre good
4. If none of that works for you then give a big offering and youre good
5. Finally Get your kids done and they are good

(If you cant tell, I am being just a little cynical today)

Its scary that you know what I mean when I say get the kids done, and it proves the point. We think if we walk through the right set of hoops in life, it is like slipping God a hundred dollar bill for a special seat at the heavenly table. But Christianity simply does not work that way, and that is exactly what Jesus was telling the Pharisees. A set of rules dont cut it. A set of hoops dont get you into heaven.

That phrase Jesus used caught me as offensive, I dont know if you heard it or not, Jesus called them, a Child of Hell. It is almost as bad as when Jesus told Peter, Get behind me Satan. Now, no matter what you think about Peter, (he was a little rough around the edges) or the Pharisees, they were all trying to be good, and do the right thing. However, in both cases, Jesus referred to their good intention as something that got in the way of their relationship with God. They were so worried about following the law that they missed the obvious. They would walk past a man beaten half to death on the road because touching him would make them unclean. (the Good Samaritan)

Unfortunately I think that is exactly what we do today. We try to jump through the right set of Christian hoops so that we look good to the world, and we feel good about ourselves, but we miss doing what God expects of us.

Have any of you seen the T.V. show *Monk*? If he shakes someones hand he has to use a sanitary wipe, if he sees something out of order he has to stop and put it in place. When he brushes his teeth he has to boil his tooth brush, then brushes an exact number of times on each side of his mouth.

Now, I dont have those kind of quirks, but only three weeks ago, while I was in the middle of an intense phone conversation and driving. I had to stop and fill up with gas, and with the ear piece in, I went in to the store to pay, but I didnt want to go

to the counter while I was in a phone conversation, so I meandered the aisle, looking for a diet soda.

Unconsciously I realized I had straightened and pulled to the front a whole shelf of chip dip and snacks. (that must have been a temporary flashback to my retail management days) Needless to say in that moment I felt like monk, like the Pharisees, needing to have everything organized and in place.

Dont laugh to hard, because I know many of you like my wife have a nightly routine of going through the house, checking the doors, and making sure everything is in place and secure before she can even think of going to bed.

That is what Jesus was condemning in the Pharisees, the fact that the temple rules had become so controlling and crippling to them. Things like, the Sabbath being an excuse not to care for the poor or sick, the cleanliness laws being an excuse to not touch or share food with someone. Basically, by the temple law they had set themselves apart as better than everyone else. And they did not accept anyone who fell short of the full standard of the law.

Today that might look like a very strict conservative church. A church where you have to be a member to enter the door, where you have to dress a certain way, where anyone who misses a Sunday or sins is not offered communion.

Now we dont even come close to that picture, in fact I think Geneseo is very open and loving. But, this passage should help us to think about whether or not there are things that a church does to set itself apart and close its doors to any group of people?

Just like the poor, sick, diseased, Samaritans and sinners of Jesus day felt disenfranchised from the temple, are there groups of people today who look at the church like it has a high fortress wall built around it with a moat filled with alligators between them and the entrance?

To be honest, from the inside, it is hard to understand what an outsider experiences. While we feel very loving, they see cold eyes of judgment, and they dont learn any different because they are afraid to walk in the doors and find out for themselves. Imagine with me. . .

A person who has no previous church connection, maybe they have kids, maybe they are lower middle class, or going through some hard times. Whatever the reason, they begin to have questions about God and faith and they feel drawn to seek faith, but they dont know how, or what that looks like.

(carrying on my cynical attitude, we consider faith a private matter so no one has invited them to church)

But, if they decide to come to church, where do you think they are intimidated first? Driving toward the church, which entrance do they come in. where do they park, and does my beat up car belong next to these shiny new vehicles? If they built up enough courage to park, they venture toward the door and wonder, which door should I use, am I dressed appropriately, what will everyone think of me? After they walk in the door it is an effort to find where to go, to look like they know what they are doing, to find a seat, then to be fearful that they are sitting in someones pew. During the service it is a struggle to keep up, when do they stand, sit, pray, read, and which book do they need. And imagine the pain of singing a song that they have never heard and feels like it comes from the Middle Ages. On top of that, when asked to use the Bible, how do they use that book and not look like a fool. (I think some of us feel that way)

With all this going through a visitors mind is it no wonder that most people run out the back door as fast as they can after the service. Without knowing it, the church has built up so many hoops that we just jump through every week, and we expect everyone to just instinctively know what those hoops are. And whether or not we expect that, they fell like it is expected.

These hoops of religious expectation have no eternal value or consequence yet we continue them as if they make a person Christian.

Now I might mention, if these people had been invited, picked up, brought, and sat with, a lot of these fear would have been avoided. If we would show people what it means to be a Christian, and show them the hoops that we have built in, they might just be more comfortable checking out what Christ has to offer. By the way, 80% of people who are invited by a friend accept the invitation.

In summary, Jesus critique of the Pharisees was because their hoops shut people out of the temple. Today we must ask ourselves, what hoops do we have that keep people out of the church? Christianity is not about hoops, it is about grace, and Christ crucified. Lets do away with the hoops and just worship God. Amen.