

“Are You a People Pleaser?”
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Menifee United Church of Christ

The late William F. Buckley, Jr. ran for mayor of New York City many years ago. He ran on the Conservative Party ticket. He knew he didn't have any chance to win. So when a reporter asked him what would be the first thing he would do if he did win, he said, "Demand a recount." Bill Buckley was not a people pleaser. Yes, he pleased people on the right, and he probably pleased some of us who aren't necessarily on the right, but appreciated the way he said things, if not what he said. But, overall Bill Buckley was not a general people pleaser.

So what's wrong with being a people pleaser? Well, sometimes nothing. We all want to make people happy, or we should try to. But sometimes if we're a people pleaser, it hurts ourselves. We say "yes" because we can't say "no." And we say yes to so many things that we overextend ourselves. And we maybe get upset about that. Resent it. Maybe feel sad and depressed that we overextended ourselves. So being a people pleaser is not always a good thing.

The Dalai Lama is a people-pleaser. In a good way. He says things that please people, like his theology. He says, "My religion is simple. My religion is kindness." How can you disagree with that?

Kindness is something we find in the Hebrew scriptures. The prophet Micah said, "God has told you, O mortal, what is good. And what does God require of you, but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with God." So we want to be kind. That pleases people and, I think, it pleases God.

Paul warns us about being people-pleasers. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul says: Do I please people, or do I please God? He says: I please God. I please Jesus. I don't necessarily please people. So we have to please God rather than people and what do we do to do that?

Well, Christians believe that we follow the teachings of Jesus. One of the most important teachings of Jesus was: When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat. When I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was naked, you clothed me. When I was a stranger, you welcomed me. When I was ill, you comforted me. When I was in prison, you visited me. Just as you did it to the least of these, who are members of my family, you did it to me. When we do those kinds of things following Jesus, we're pleasing people, and also we're pleasing God.

Jesus was not a religious people pleaser. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath. He sees a woman who's been crippled for eighteen years. He heals her. The religious leaders complain to Jesus that he healed her on the Sabbath. Oh my goodness! Jesus said: You hypocrites! If you have a donkey that is thirsty, you untie it, on the Sabbath, and lead it to water. How much more important is this woman, who was crippled for eighteen years?

So Jesus demonstrates to us that we don't always have to follow the letter of the law, but what's important is to follow the spirit of the law. You're not supposed to do anything on the Sabbath, but Jesus says you can heal on the Sabbath. You can do good, you can love people on the Sabbath. You can be kind to people on the Sabbath. That pleases Jesus, that pleases God. And probably pleases people, except for some religious leaders sometimes.

Jesus was an interfaith people-pleaser. Also in the gospel of Luke, Jesus was visited by a centurion. Now the centurion likely wasn't Jewish, was a non-Jew, was a Gentile. And the centurion asked Jesus if he would heal his servant who was near death. And Jesus did. Jesus healed the centurion's servant. But wait a minute, the centurion was likely not a Jew! But that didn't matter to Jesus. Jesus healed the servant because he loves people. He loves everyone, regardless of their faith tradition.

And he's demonstrating to us that we should do the same. That we should love everyone regardless of their faith tradition. Regardless of their faith. And we do that, I think, to please Jesus and to please God.

Moses was not a people pleaser. Moses is up on the mountain, talking to God. He's been up there for a while. God looks down on the people and notices that they're doing something wrong. God tells Moses: You better get down there. This is in the book of Exodus. And what happened was, as you probably know, the people complained that they hadn't seen Moses in a while. They hadn't had a word of God in a while. So they demanded that Aaron give them another god to worship. So Aaron said: Give me all your gold jewelry, your rings and things. And he melted them down. And he formed a golden calf out of them. And the people worshiped the golden calf, which upset God. Which upset Moses. Moses came down and pulverized the golden calf.

Moses demonstrated to us that God doesn't like us to worship false idols. Now Moses could have been a people-pleaser. He could have come down from the mountain and said: Oh, you want to worship a golden calf? OK, well, let's take a vote. All those who want to worship a golden calf, please raise your hand; all those who want to worship the One True God, please raise your hand. And there probably would have been more people who wanted to worship the golden calf. But Moses was not a people pleaser, Moses was a God pleaser. So Moses pulverized the golden calf, and that pleased God, and the people worshiped God. God does not like people worshipping idols.

In the book of I Kings, Elijah notices people worshipping the false god Baal. So Elijah says: You guys take some meat, put it on the altar, pray to your god, Baal, and see if he consumes the meat with fire. See if he's going to grill that meat. Set it and forget it! was probably what he said. Maybe not. So they do that, they put the meat out on the altar, they pray to the god Baal, and nothing happens. Elijah starts mocking the people, the Baal worshipers. Then Elijah takes meat, puts it on an altar, and prays to God and fire consumes the meat. Then the Baal worshipers worship the One True God.

God does not like us worshipping idols. Do we do that? Do we worship a false god? Maybe not Baal, but do we worship the television set? (I'm probably somewhat guilty of that.) Do we worship money? Do we worship the one-armed bandit? (My daughter's in Vegas this weekend, probably worshipping the one-armed bandit.) But anyway... Do we worship a presidential candidate? Do we expect a presidential candidate to be our savior? God does not like it. God is not pleased when we worship false idols.

We are to be God pleasers. As it says in Psalm 96: "O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless God's name; tell of God's salvation from day to day." So we are to be God pleasers.

So how can we be God pleasers? Well, by singing to God. By praising God. By glorifying God. By noticing God's creation. By praying to God. By listening to God. By spending time with God. Not just for one hour a week in church. But for some of the other 167 hours of the week. You know, the ones God created.

Some people call our church "the gay church." As you know, we put up a rainbow flag a couple months ago. After a couple of days, that was ripped down so we put up another rainbow flag. And that was ripped down. Now, we're going to have a meeting in a couple of weeks to see whether we should put up another rainbow symbol. It's not going to be a flag, it's going to be like a big bumper sticker to make it harder for somebody to rip down. There is a church up in the San Francisco area that had their rainbow flag ripped down seven or eight times, but they kept putting it up. And we're going to have to decide whether we're going to keep putting it up, not to prove that we're "the gay church," but to prove that we welcome everyone.

A few weeks ago, this church voted unanimously to become Open and Affirming, which is a United Church of Christ designation meaning that we welcome everyone. We're also talking about putting a "Coexist" sign on the side of our building next to or under the rainbow banner that we'll hopefully put up, to show that we welcome and respect everybody. I think when we do that, that pleases God. God is love after all. And if we show love to everybody, I believe that pleases the God of love.

I went before the city council of Menifee a little more than a year ago to talk about the homeless. At that time we were housing about a half dozen homeless people in our church and on our church property. The city had just done a survey on the number of homeless in the city of Menifee. They said there were a dozen homeless people in the city of Menifee. I told the city council that I doubted that we were housing half of the city's homeless population in our church and on our grounds. I said that the homeless people tell me there's more like forty or sixty homeless people in the city of Menifee. I said to the city council, "If it's not on your agenda already, please put dealing with the homeless on your agenda." One of the city council members said, "Bill, you just put it on our agenda." There was a meeting a few months ago about the homeless and there's going to be another meeting in a few weeks about the homeless.

Now, when I did that, it wasn't exactly people pleasing. Some of you may know that my picture was put up on a bulletin board in the neighborhood a few months ago and somebody put words next to it that said something like: Reverend Freeman is the devil for housing the homeless. They called Jesus the devil at times, too, so I'm in pretty good company. I do that not to please people, but to please God. I think it pleases God when we try to do something for the homeless. Jesus said, "Just as you did it to the least of these, who are members of my family, you did it to me." So when we do things for others, when we help others, it may not please everybody, but I believe it pleases God; I believe it pleases Jesus, and I believe it pleases the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray:

*God of love,
Help us to help people.*

*Help us to be kind to people.
And help us to please you.
Now and forevermore.
By the power of the Holy Spirit.
And in the name of Jesus.
Amen.*