

# Menifee United Church of Christ

Established in 1962 by God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit

## SERMON FOR

November 8, 2015

*“Beware of Pious Phonies”*



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## ***Menifee United Church of Christ***

*Sunday Service and Sunday School 10 AM*

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***Live Life Fully Alive!***

### **Psalm 42:8-11**

*By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. I say to God, my rock, 'Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?' As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, 'Where is your God?' Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.*

### **Mark 12:38-40**

*As he taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'*

### ***Beware of Pious Phonies***

Two thousand people were sitting in church, ready to hear the preacher's sermon, when two men entered the church. They were carrying automatic weapons. One of the men shouted, "Everyone willing to take a bullet for Jesus stay in your seats!" Nearly everyone fled in a panic. After a few moments, there were only about twenty people left in church. The two men put away their weapons and said, "All right, Preacher, you may now begin your sermon. The hypocrites are gone."

There are religious hypocrites, or pious phonies, in church. Back when I was a TV news reporter, my cameraman and I went to the house of a minister who had begun an anti-porn campaign. We went into his home office. He picked up a briefcase, opened it, and proceeded to pull out magazine after magazine of naked women. He said, "Look what the brothers and I were able to find at a local bookstore!" Now I'm no prude, but I wondered whether he and the brothers really needed to buy dozens of magazines with pictures of naked women in them to prove their

point. As I say, there are religious hypocrites, or pious phonies, in church.

I knew that 14 years ago, when I felt called to the ministry. Some of you may know, I felt called to the ministry on my birthday in 2001. My birthday is 9-11. After those planes flew into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania, I felt called by God to pursue a path to pastoring to one day preach love in a sometimes hateful world.

So I went to seminary. And when I was in seminary, I realized that I had never been baptized. (I'm probably the only person who ever attended seminary who'd never been baptized.) So I went to the pastor of the church where I was doing an internship and I said I'd like to be baptized this Sunday. I woke up that Sunday, looked at the calendar, and said, "Oh my goodness. It's December 7th. Pearl Harbor day." The church wanted me to say something before my baptism. So I said, "I hoped those two dates, my birthday, 9/11, and my baptism day, December 7th, mean that my ministry will always be about justice and peace. (And hopefully as a minister, I won't be a religious hypocrite, or a pious phony.)"

As he taught, Jesus said, "Beware of the scribes." (Elsewhere he says beware of the scribes and the Pharisees, the Biblical literalists of his day, who followed the letter, but not always the spirit of the law; they were also the religious hypocrites or pious phonies of his day.) Jesus said, "They like to walk around in long robes and pray long prayers. They like to have the best seats in the House of Worship. They like to have places of honor at religious banquets. Then maybe no one will notice when they do evil deeds." Jesus essentially said: Beware of pious phonies.

I didn't go into the ministry to pattern myself after pious phonies. I went into the ministry to pattern myself after spiritual giants, like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." I went into the ministry to pattern myself after spiritual giants, like Rev. William Sloane

Coffin, who said, “Love measures our stature: the more we love, the bigger we are.” And I went into the ministry to pattern myself after spiritual giants, like Jesus, who said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus knew his share of pious phonies. Jesus said, “Many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord.’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’” So, pious phonies are evildoers. That makes sense.

Judas was a pious phony. He acted like Jesus’s friend. But almost the whole time of Jesus’s ministry, which lasted around a year, Judas was plotting behind Jesus’s back, eager to betray Jesus. Maybe Judas thought he should be the Messiah and Jesus should be his disciple. Although if anybody would’ve asked Judas how he felt about Jesus, Judas probably would have lied and said, “I love Jesus. I bless his ministry.” Then the day came when Judas, who Jesus thought was his friend, demonstrated how much he “loved” Jesus and how much he “blessed” his ministry, when Judas betrayed Jesus. Judas was a pious phony.

I came to this church knowing that California allowed same-sex marriage. I came to this church knowing that the United Church of Christ - the denomination we’re affiliated with - has supported same-sex marriage since 2005. I came to this church and preached about taking the Bible lovingly, but not always literally, especially the seven anti-gay Bible passages, since First John says, “God is love,” and since those passages are not love; I said those passages can be ignored because, as Jesus taught us, love trumps the law. I came to this church and conducted a same-sex wedding last July - marrying our office manager and his beloved - the first same-sex wedding held at this church in its 53 year history.

When it was learned that I supported same-sex weddings, a dozen or so parishioners complained about me. But, hey, I performed 48 same-sex weddings in one day back in Michigan, when a federal judge declared the state’s gay marriage ban

unconstitutional. I saw love first hand at those weddings. The kind of love Jesus talked about. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." So, where I stood shouldn't have come as a surprise. Now, I could've ignored the teachings of Jesus and John, and not performed a same-sex wedding, so those parishioners would like me, but then I would have been a pious phony.

When our then tenant, the church that rented our Fellowship Hall from us, heard that I would perform same-sex weddings in our sanctuary, and thus we'd have same-sex wedding receptions in their sanctuary - our Fellowship Hall - that church decided to leave. Some claim I forced them out. But that's not true. They chose to leave because they opposed this church abiding by the law of the land in California. That law, and the ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court making same-sex weddings legal across America, brought justice to same-sex couples. And the Prophet Micah said, "God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does God require of you but to do justice"? Now I could have ignored the prophet Micah, and I could have told our office manager he couldn't marry his beloved in our church, so our tenant would stay, but then I would have been a pious phony.

If you ever find yourself tempted to be a pious phony, then do what the Psalmist recommends, "Hope in God." Hope that God will give you the courage to resist becoming a pious phony. Hope that God will encourage people who have become pious phonies to repent. And hope that God will enlighten churchgoers, so they won't ever fall for pious phonies.

When I arrived at this church 15 months ago I saw "No Trespassing" signs in the Peace Garden. I asked, "Why are there 'No Trespassing' signs in the Peace Garden?" I was told, "Oh, those are there to keep homeless people out. And we've asked the police to run off any homeless people from our Peace Garden." What?! I quickly tore down those "No Trespassing" signs and put up a new sign: Peace Garden Open For Prayer 24-7. Then I told the police that if they see anyone in our Peace

Garden who looks homeless, they're to assume that they're prayers and leave them alone.

Then we started a Residential Assistance Program in our church. Not everyone likes our Residential Assistance Program. Thirty or so of our neighbors showed up at a city council meeting a few months ago to complain that we're running a "Homeless Shelter." I and others explained to the city council that we don't have a "Homeless Shelter," we have a Residential Assistance Program, a place for homeless people to spend the night. We do that because of Jesus, who said, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Now I could have ignored the teachings of Jesus, and ignored the plight of homeless people, so some people outside and inside this church would like me, but then I would have been a pious phony.

One night during our Bible study in my office, we were reading about Jesus's teachings. "I was hungry and you fed me...I was naked and you clothed me." I looked around and said, "Why don't we put non-perishable food items on a wall of bookshelves in my office? And why don't we put clothing and other items in a closet in my office?" So we did. Thus were born our Food Pantry and our Clothing Closet for poor people in need. Of course, we've heard complaints, either from neighbors or our parishioners, especially about our food pantry. Now I could have ignored the teachings of Jesus, and ignored the needs of poor people, so everyone would like me, but then I would have been a pious phony.

This church was founded in 1962. I was called to this church in 2014. I was called to this church - by the congregation and I believe by God - to follow the teachings of Jesus: Love one another, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and house the homeless. I was not called to this church to be a pious phony. I was also called to this church, in part, to usher this church into the 21st Century. I believe, with your help and God's, this church has finally entered the 21st Century.

A church in North Carolina is housing the homeless, just like us. Just like us, that church is following the teachings of Jesus. Just like us, that church saw neighbors complain to the city government about homeless people living in their church. And just like us, that church continues to house homeless people. Now that church could have ignored the teachings of Jesus, so their neighbors would like them, but then that church would have been peopled by a bunch of pious phonies.

That North Carolina church and this Southern California church can take some comfort in knowing that Jesus did not spend his ministry going against his own beliefs, so that people would like him, or he would have been a pious phony. Instead, he overturned the money changers tables, he spoke truth to power, he preached love in the face of hate, he preached forgiveness in the face of revenge, and he preached peace in the face of war. Because of all that, and with the help of Judas, of course, they crucified him. And I believe that, after his resurrection, Jesus wore that crucifixion like a badge of honor.

If I'm ever dismissed by a church - which is the modern-day equivalent of being figuratively crucified - because I follow the teachings of Jesus, and because I refuse to try to get people to like me by being a pious phony, I will wear that dismissal like a badge of honor. And then, after shaking the dust off my shoes, I will continue my ministry of justice and peace.

Let us pray...

*God of Love,  
Help us to never be pious phonies.  
Help us to never be fooled by pious phonies.  
And help us to know that you are with us...  
Now and forevermore.  
By the power of the Holy Spirit.  
And in the name of Jesus.  
Amen.*

## THE GOLDEN RULE

*Do to others what you would  
have them do to you.*

Christianity

*What is hateful to you  
do not do to others.*

Judaism

*None of you believes until he wishes for his  
brother what he wishes for himself.*

Islam

*Do not do to others  
what would cause pain if done to you.*

Hinduism

*Hurt not others in ways that you yourself  
would find hurtful.*

Buddism

*Regard your neighbor's gain as your gain,  
and your neighbor's loss as your loss.*

Taoism

*Do not do to others  
what you do not want them to do to you.*

Confucianism

*Treat other people  
as you'd want to be treated in their situation.*

Humanism