

2 Timothy 2: 8-15
Luke 17: 11-19
October 10, 2010
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

One of my wild and rebellious ideas is to put this message on the sign by Western Avenue: DON'T GO TO CHURCH!

My idea is to get the attention of the people who drive by who think that is what Christians do. Christians go to church. "Church" in the popular mind is a vague mix of the building—"the church"—and what happens inside the church. In addition, "going to church" is identified with engaging in the routine of formal institutional religion. The image conjured up by such a description is that of people engaged in a thoughtless routine. "Going to church" in this light suggests an empty convention—people going through the motions of ritual that no longer connect to anything lively or real.

Thus it is that many people say, "I don't go to church. I am spiritual, not religious."

Sadly, there is much truth in this critique of what is called institutional religion. The experience of many people who come to what used to be called "mainline protestant churches" is one of plodding music, formal prayers and dry theological sermons. It is why many people go to worship in congregations that have exciting contemporary music and dramatic presentations. People yearn to *feel something* in worship. People want to experience some affirmation that there is something to this God thing. They want there to be some connection between what happens "in church" and the great message of salvation of god through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Friends, I am here to tell you, *they are not wrong.*

And if “going to church” means subjecting yourself to empty routine, then again I say, “DON’T GO TO CHURCH!”

But my rebellious message has a deeper suggestion, which by the way, has to do with this morning’s scripture from Luke. I propose that “going to church” is a statement of what we expect. There is a sense when say we are going to church that we are fulfilling some sacred obligation. Even if we do not “go to church” the ghosts of our past haunt us and we think we *should* go to church. One of my trials as a minister is to meet someone at a social gathering; and when the person discovers I am a minister, he or she launches into a long guilty ramble about not going to church. I remember doing the same thing to a dentist back in the days when I was not caring for my teeth.

If going to church is akin to going to the dentist, DON’T GO TO CHURCH! This morning I suggest that the passage from Luke provides a model for a healthy alternative.

Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. At the end of the journey are the great events of Holy Week. As he and his disciples walk along the road ten people afflicted with leprosy call out to him for healing. Jesus tells them to go to the priests to be declared ritually clean. Now before we get ahead of ourselves, this is no ordinary request. To obey Jesus is acutely risky. If they arrive at the door of the priest still with the condition of leprosy they will be punished for failing to obey the Law of Moses. To obey Jesus is a statement of courageous faith. Faith is acting without proof. Faith is stepping out in trust when there is no evidence other than a belief that the one who gives us direction is reliable. Faith means taking a risk that what I hope will happen *might not happen*.

Baptism is such an act of faith. Melanie and Adam have brought their precious son, Ryan, to this place and have, in faith, marked him with the sign of the death and

resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is no evidence that such an act will protect Ryan or ensure a happy, healthy life. Yet they come because they trust in the God who gave them this child. And we who come witness our faith that they are right to do this. We witness that God is faithful and can be trusted. As representatives of the community of Christians around the world it is our calling to be evidence to Adam, Ryan and Melanie that they are right to trust. *God is faithful.*

We will miss the power of the story if we fail to appreciate the courageous faith of all ten of the people who have called out to Jesus and who have obeyed his direction.

And what happens? As they step on the road in obedience to Jesus *they are healed!* They may now continue on to the priest with the full expectation of being restored to their community, their families and friends.

But there is one—not a Jew as it turns out. This morning we might dare to say that this one was not a churchgoer or even a Christian. He is on his way when he realizes what has happened. He is stopped in his tracks. Gone are the open sores and the ugly scars. His skin and his body is restored and he knows he is a free man. What does he do? He can do what the others have done and go to the priest. But he is a foreigner. What can the priest do for him?

So he turns and runs to Jesus. Weeping with gratitude he throws himself at Jesus' feet blubbering out words of thanks.

Friends, I propose to you that this is what people do instead of “go to church.” They come to say thank you for the love, hope and healing that come from God through our savior and redeemer, Jesus Christ. This is what *we* do. Every Sunday we make the

intentional choice to come here to witness to God's love in Jesus Christ, thank him for his grace and mercy in our lives and to open our hearts to his healing.

It is my hope that when you get up on Sunday morning, get dressed and get in your cars that you will not say, "I am going to church." I hope you will say, I have been touched by the Savior's hand and I am returning to give thanks. Amen.