

The Fourth Sunday after Trinity
St. Luke 6:36-42

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

I know of a story of a counselor who met with a prostitute who was in dire straits. She was homeless and sick. She could hardly buy food enough to feed her two-year old daughter and herself. With tears and through sobs, she told the counselor that she was renting out her two-year old daughter to her men. She made more money that way than in the “traditional” way. It’s not that the woman wanted to do it, but that she felt that she had to. The counselor could hardly bear to hear any more—he had already heard enough to make him legally liable to report a case of child abuse. He wasn’t sure what he could tell her, but the thought occurred to ask her if she had ever thought about going to a church for help.

When he did ask, the look on the woman’s face was one of consternation. “Church!? Why would I go there? I am already feeling terrible about myself and what I have done. They would only make me feel worse.” Once, a prostitute sought refuge from an angry mob with Jesus. (cf. John 8:2-11) Now, a prostitute dare not find refuge among those who call themselves His disciples.

I know of a story of a missionary who was in Cambodia. He was in a coffee bar where a conversation was struck up, and as they invariably do, he was asked what brought him to Cambodia. He, being a white man of European features, stuck out in Cambodia like a sore thumb. “I’m a Christian on a year-long mission trip.” The conversation took a sour turn after that; the other participants did whatever they could to bring it to a close.

What brought the conversation to a screeching halt? The man called himself a Christian. Now, sure, Jesus told His disciples that the world would hate them because it hates Him. (cf. Luke 6:22; John 15:18; *et al*), but this is a bit different. The people in the coffee bar weren’t necessarily hostile toward the man—they didn’t hate him—they simply wanted nothing more to do with him. He didn’t tell them about their Lord and Savior, didn’t ask to pray with them, didn’t invite them to a church or Bible study. He merely said He was a Christian.

What is it about the word Christian that puts people off? What is it about the church that turns people looking for refuge and respite away?

The answer can be found in a movie from not too many years ago: *Easy A*. It’s a modern retelling of *The Scarlet Letter*, but with a bit of a twist, centered around a high school student in the altered role of Hester Prynne. I won’t go into the details of the movie, but suffice it to say that the Hester Prynne character has acquired a besmirched reputation, not for what she actually did, but for what it is perceived that she had done, though she did nothing to deny the reputation, but wore here scarlet letter badge with a modicum of pride.

The answer is found in a group of high school students who comprise the extracurricular Christian group. They are found during recess and lunch breaks sitting in the plaza, making a circle, playing the guitar and singing Kumbaya. As their fellow students walk by, they talk about them and their sins, judging and condemning their actions. At one point, the president of this group bluntly and pridefully tells the Hester Prynne character, “There’s a higher power that will judge you for your indecency.” As much as the Hester Prynne character has a bad reputation, and plays it up, the Christian group also has a bad reputation because of their attitude toward the other students; they are pejoratively referred to as Jesus Freaks.

The group in the movie is meant to portray a caricaturization of Christians. Now, a caricature is meant to over-accent the dominant traits of a person or group; normally, these are physical features of individuals, but they can also include other characteristics, such as mentality or attitudes. What the

writers of the movie intended to portray about Christians is that they are demeaning and judgmental toward others, especially those who are not Christian or those whose sins are publicly known or assumed.

So, the prostitute didn't seek refuge, respite, and aid from the church because she is certain that she would be condemned for being a prostitute. The Cambodian coffee house patrons avoided further conversation with the Christian because they are certain that they would be judged and condemned by him for not being Christians. However, in both of these cases, it's not merely the condemnation and judgment for being who they are or are not that puts them off, but also the attitude that is expressed or exuded that they are worse off because they are not Christian.

It's not that there isn't any truth to all of this. Prostitution is certainly condemnable. It is also true that those who have no faith in Jesus Christ at the last day will be cast into the lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (cf. Matthew 25:41) What's missing in all of this is love. The truth is necessary, but if love is missing, the truth is little more than sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:1)

Certain reactions to an event from a week ago demonstrates that the caricature of Christians in the movie isn't too far off. As a terrorist ripped through attendees at a night club with a hail of bullets, 49 people were killed, and many were injured. It was no secret that this night club was a so-called "gay bar." Some reactions rightly condemned the actions of the man who carried out the act of terrorism. Some so-called Christian, however, hailed it as God's wrath against the homosexuals. Others found other ways to judge and condemn the victims because of their homosexuality without any mention or condemnation of the shooter.

It's stuff like this that has created this caricature of Christians. Holier-than-thou, condemning sinners, proclaiming eternal hellfire to those who don't live a certain way. Again, the truth is all in there, but it is lacking in love. And for you, it may not be in response to such a grand and tragic event as in Orlando. However, let this give you cause to examine how you react those those whom you would consider undesirable. Perhaps he's your homosexual neighbor. Maybe she's the pregnant teenager working in the supermarket. It could even be the homeless addict who begs on the highway exit ramp. Or maybe it's just someone who has wronged you, even if only in some insignificant manner. It *is* anyone whose sin is so obviously before you.

Do you, then, fit the mold of the caricature of Christians in the movie? There are people whose sins are obviously before you—worn like a badge, a scarlet letter—and how do you react? Well, you judge and condemn them, if only under your breath. Or, you loudly proclaim, "love the sinner, hate the sin," but go on your merry way, merely paying lip-service to the idea, but doing nothing else. Or, you simply do whatever it is you can do to avoid interacting with the undesirables.

Jesus said, "Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful."

You hear that as an imperative, and so it is. But underlying the command to be merciful is the fact that you, who are in Christ, are by nature merciful, according to your new man. You are merciful, because your Father is merciful. Now, how do you hear that?

Well, in those times when you have encountered your less-than-desirable neighbors, and you acted less than merciful toward them, you should hear it as a judgment against you and your sin. Your Savior commands you to be merciful toward others as your Father in heaven is merciful—as He has shown mercy toward you—and you should recall those times when you haven't been. You are supposed to be a neighbor to all whose path you cross, and so recall the parable of the Good Samaritan. (cf. Luke 10:30-37) The Law, as it chiefly does, shows you your sins. The Law judges and condemns your sins. It kills you.

So, what's wrong? Your being—your nature—should be merciful since you are in Christ. But, you still battle against your old, evil nature—your Old Adam. He doesn't care about mercy toward others, but whatever it is he can do to give you a leg up on others. So, you see the homosexual and unwed mother and addict as undesirable and undeserving of your mercy and love. It was the very same president of that Christian student group who, in an attempt to justify her bad attitude toward the undesirables complained, "Jesus tells us to love everyone, even [sinners], but it's just so hard because they keep doing it..." That's sinful, Old Adam talk. Jesus doesn't qualify your mercifulness; He doesn't limit to whom you should show mercy, as to only those you think deserve it, or to those toward whom it is easy to show mercy.

"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) That's the mercy of the Father for you. While you were still sinners—enemies of God—He sent His son to die for you. If there is any greater example of mercy being shown to those who should be deemed less-than-desirable and love to those who should be unlovable, I don't know about it. What you deserve in God's inestimable justice is death. What you get in return for the death of His Son, Jesus Christ, is life. What great, good news.

So, then, how does this mercy towards others look? Jesus fills in that detail, too.

Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.

You are made merciful by way of being made part of the Body of Christ. You have been forgiven for your sins against God, so now you can forgive those who sin against you. You have been given much from your providential Father, sometimes more than enough for your needs, in order that you can give to those who are lacking—you would be God's gift to them. And if you would take Jesus at His word—He who does not lie—then you are rewarded for your acts of mercy, forgiveness, and love toward others, even and including those to whom you would rather not be.

Yes, it is hard, just as the Christian from the movie complains. It was difficult for Jesus to go to the cross for you and for all. Recall his agony in the garden on the night in which He was betrayed. Jesus didn't want to do it for what lay before Him, but for the joy that was also before Him, endured the cross, scorning its shame. (cf. Hebrews 12:2)

That joy that was before Him was making a friend of God's enemies. It was restoring His creation to right sonship with the Father. It was making you righteous, giving you His righteousness in exchange for your sin. He knew how unlovable you were, but loved you anyway. He knows how difficult it is to show love and mercy to those you think unlovable and undeserving of your mercy, and so He is merciful to you. In fact, His mercy overcomes your lack of mercy—His love overcomes your lack of love.

By that, He makes you lovable and loving. He makes you deserving of His mercy and merciful. He makes you receiving and giving. He makes you forgiving just as He forgives you for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.