

Trinity 4 (2024)

After a check-engine light came on, a woman took her car to the garage the family had used for years.

After some waiting, the mechanic came back with bad news. A major component was failing and needed to be replaced. The cost was around \$500.

She scheduled an appointment. However, before the time came to take the vehicle in, a friend of her husband, a trained mechanic, took a look at the car and said all that was needed was a \$15 hose. He went to a parts store, bought it and installed it in a span of about five minutes. The woman cancelled her appointment at the garage.

Later, it was discovered that the mechanic was in the habit of making unnecessary repairs in order to increase revenue.

In these days of social media, it did not take long for the garage to lose its credibility. People stopped taking their cars there, and it went out of business.

As businesses can lose credibility, so can Christians.

It comes about like this. Those outside of the Christian Church see people claiming to be followers of Jesus who are quarrelsome, who make hasty judgments, who are divided over peripheral issues, who magnify the faults of others while turning a blind eye to their own.

How do they respond?

They may well say, “Why in the world would I want to get mixed up with that bunch? I have enough problems of my own. They are as messed up as everyone else.”

“I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ,” Mahatma Gandhi is supposed to have said.

And so, there is a loss of credibility.

How do we guard against this?

Before I seek to answer this question, let me say that *some* stands Christians make will be unpopular.

The early Christians, for example, refused to give the worship that belonged to God alone to an earthly ruler. When commanded to offer incense to Ceasor, they said no. In so doing, they faced ridicule, persecution and disfranchisement.

No doubt there are some stands Christians today feel called to make which puts them at odds with the prevailing culture.

For example, we stand for truth and integrity in the public arena.

We stand for fidelity and loyalty in married life.

We stand for honesty, good craftsmanship and fair treatment in commercial life.

We stand against anything that diminishes or destroys those made in God's image.

Any marginalization or loss of credibility which comes about as a result of stances like these cannot be avoided.

The loss of credibility about which I am thinking this morning, however, is of a different sort. It follows from making superficial judgments, saying one thing and doing another, and having a hyper-critical spirit.

These causes for loss of credibility would almost entirely go away if we got our minds round Jesus' words in today's Gospel and actually followed them.

In this passage, which is part of Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, the Master deals with how His followers treat others. In particular, He calls them to do three things: to have **open hearts, open hands and open eyes.**

Let's look at each, beginning with the first, **open hearts.**

“Be ye merciful, even as your Father also is merciful,” says Jesus.

God has an open heart to fallible, weak, erring human beings. He commends His love to us while we are still sinners. We should follow His example.

Put another way, those who have received mercy should extend mercy. Jesus makes this same point in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant found in Matthew's Gospel.

In this story, one servant owes his master a huge sum, an amount well beyond his ability to pay. The only thing this servant can do is plead for mercy, which he does. In response, his master forgives the entire debt.

Then, as the story moves forward, the forgiven servant confronts a fellow servant who owes him a paltry sum and demands payment. When this servant asks for mercy, no mercy is shown.

Of course, we are left thinking what a miserable man this unforgiving servant was.

Yet, if we look closer at ourselves, we discover we are the man. We act in this manner when we refuse to let go of old slights and hurts

. . . when we refuse to forgive . . . when we fail to show mercy.

As I said last week, the way of today's culture is to 'cancel' those who don't measure up to your standard, those with whom you disagree.

Followers of Jesus are called to go in the opposite direction . . . to be ready to forgive . . . to have open hearts

What about your heart? What about mine? Are they open? Are we kind, forgiving, longsuffering? Can people see Jesus in us?

Let's move our second 'open' -- **open hands.**

“Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom,” says Jesus.

The imagery here is drawn from grain dealing in the Middle East. The generous dealer would press down the grain and shake it after measuring it out. It would then be poured into a fold or pocket formed from the buyer's robe.

Christ's followers are to act in like manner. They are to be generous in spirit and deed

It has been said, **“You can't outgive God.”**

Many will testify to the truth of these words. The more they give of their money, time and talent, the more they find they have. God is a great multiplier. Why not put Him to the test?

Generosity marks people out as credible Christians.

Open hearts, open hands and finally **open eyes.**

Jesus teaches this precept with the parable of the blind leading the blind.

Religious leaders seem to be especially in view here, but no Christian is left out.

The scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' day claimed to be eagerly looking for the arrival of the Kingdom of God and the Messiah. But when God's Anointed showed up, they not only refused to believe themselves but sought to keep others from believing. They were blind guides.

Religious leaders today must be careful not to follow in their footsteps.

They must be spiritually enlightened so they can bring light to others.

They must be able to see clearly themselves – have open eyes -- before they can bring correction to others . . . which God's ministers and teachers at times must do.

To be in this position, they must sieve their thoughts and actions through the revealed word of truth – the holy scriptures.

By the same token, people in the pews need to be on the lookout for blind teachers and not to be led astray by them.

How do they do this? //// By opening *their* eyes to the things found in the sacred scriptures and by learning how to apply them in a meaningful way.

That is why the studies we have here at St. Luke's are so important. They are not just to impart knowledge for the sake of knowledge, but to foster a discerning spirit . . . that is, to give people the tools they need to think, pray and live biblically and so to make them credible Christians.

Phony-baloney Christians turn people away from Christ and His Church. Authentic,

credible Christians do the exact opposite. They pique the interest of those outside the church and draw the lost – at least some of them -- in.

“By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another,” says Jesus in John 13:35.

If you want to serve your generation for Christ, if you want to make a difference in the world, if you want to receive God’s “Well done” at the end of life’s journey, show love, genuine love, love which has feet and hands.

Now more than ever, credible Christians are needed, people with open hearts, open hands and open eyes.

We’ve all heard of “ugly Americans,” those who go abroad with a condescending spirit and who bring shame and ridicule on this country.

There are also “ugly Christians,” people who looks down on those who don’t follow *their* rules and who use their Bibles as weapons against them. In so doing they discredit the Gospel of Christ and bring scorn and ridicule on His Church.

Jesus in today’s Gospel points us down a different path. Let’s resolve to go His way, to be none other than credible Christians.