

Some Rules for God's Household

Preached on The Fourth Sunday after Trinity
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
July 10, 2022
Text: Luke 6: 36-42

Our Lord's teaching in the Gospel for Trinity IV is about how the Children of God are to behave, and it is no surprise then that Jesus links this with the way the Father relates to us. Since we are God's offspring we ought to behave as our Father does, acting toward his creation with mercy and forgiveness. God's Children imitate God as we cooperate with the grace with which we were infused at our Baptism into Jesus.

Jesus taught his disciples that a complete reorientation toward God, toward one's neighbor, and toward all creation was necessary to see the Kingdom of God. Luke takes up this reorientation as a major theme of his Gospel, and like a good writer, he shows what that reorientation looks like. Of course we cannot give Luke all the credit; he was after all quoting Jesus.

Also note it is a whole community, a holy community that instantiates the reoriented reality, not merely individuals. The new community should exhibit a distinctive character that distinguishes it from the phony piety of so many others. This is because the new community, which is the Church of Christ, has no higher loyalty than Jesus Christ. He is the center of our life, the Church is his Bride. His interpretation of the Old Testament, his interpretation of Israel's mission, his ultimate concerns have become our ultimate concerns. By the grace of Holy Baptism we have been born again and grafted into Christ's life, so that now we share in his redeemed humanity and his life-giving divinity.

The teaching that we have laid before us today is meant for us. It is not the way nations are run, which generally operate on manipulation, misrepresentation, and coercion. Yet we still pray that nations would exhibit the virtues of the children of God in their laws and policies. Nevertheless, the Sermon on the Plain and the Sermon on the Mount are meant for Jesus' Family. The teachings here concern the way his siblings ought, and by virtue of the grace of God, *can* live within the Family of God and in the world as well.

“Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven: give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give unto your bosom.”

Jesus delivered four exhortations on judgment to his disciples. Love and mercy are meant to be the standard for life in the Body of Christ, and these underlie his warnings about judging and dismissing others. The world is full of harsh judgment and

condemnation; but this should not be true of the Children of God. How, then, are we to model the Father's mercy?

Well, first of all, mercy will not hold a brother or sister fixed in a state of condemnation. Jesus is not forbidding his disciples to make appropriate ethical evaluations. He is not suggesting that we simply ignore sin as though that will make it all better. What Jesus is absolutely forbidding in our common life is judgment concerning a person's finality, as well as judgments that presume we do not also need forgiveness. Nor do Christians continually exact shame and guilt through an unrelenting condemnation of a person who has fallen. Jesus insists that we be steady and dependable in seeking to understand, to be slow to write off a person, and quick to forgive the repentant. He forbids the false piety of those whose very hostility toward the sinner is thought to be righteousness itself.

"Do Not Condemn and You Will Not Be Condemned." Do we really think Jesus means this? Could he really mean that God will treat us the way we treat others? This is quite remarkable. He seems to be saying that there is a strong link between the man or woman who lives without condemning others and this person's knowledge that he or she is absolved and set free by God. To know in one's heart that God is a gracious God, predisposes one to live graciously in the world. Jesus' disciples will be gracious because they have experienced the grace of God. Because they have experienced this, they will be moved by mercy toward others. And the same is the case for forgiveness.

St. Paul summed this way of life up in Ephesians 4:31-32: "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." Christ is not telling us that we should pretend that a person is innocent when he or she is guilty. But what he is saying is that we, as his disciples, are not to hold an action permanently against another disciple. Once a person has sought forgiveness and amended his or her life, then we should be open to imitating the Father, encouraging that person and coming alongside him or her as a friend.

Finally our Lord speaks to generosity. Generosity is a mark of Christian character and it is the thread that holds all these imperatives together. For to practice generosity is to practice divinity. Really these are all expression of the same way a life, a way of life that imitates the mercy and generosity of the Father toward all of us. Christ offers forgiveness to the world that he loves. And his call to forgiveness is a call to love one another as he has loved us. Luke's emphasis falls on how we treat one another. We are to love one another, to live graciously toward one another, and when the opportunity arises, to forgive one another. Christ calls us to turn from our preoccupation with the spiritual condition of others, and be attentive to our own conformity to the love and generosity of Christ.

In fact, Christ calls us to self-sacrificing love. The disciple of Christ is to be exceptional in love and generosity and this is to overflow from the Church into the world. The world, however, has good reason to suspect such love, generosity, and humility as a power play in disguise. Our tired, cynical world cannot imagine any institution or

association acting in good faith. And the Church's credibility has taken a real nosedive, especially for those under 40. All of us, whatever our age, have been lied to so often and subjected to so much gaslighting that many have decided that truth doesn't exist. All that remains is power and the narratives that maintain it. The nihilism that was once the province of academics has now come home to roost.

But we cannot let our decadent world position us. If we do, we are lost. We are the Israel of God and the Bride of Christ. We should not bow to the gods the world does. Our complete loyalty is to Christ, the Lover of our Souls. It is not for us to second-guess him, nor spend the lion share of our efforts in making sure that we remain relevant and palatable to those who seek worldly domination.

Yet this is exactly what the Church has been doing for centuries. She has ceded more and more ground to the world until her distinctiveness is merely theoretical. In desiring State support, especially after the Reformation, the Church increasingly had to see the State's aims as its aims. Earlier, the Church viewed the state as the maintainer of order, enabling the spread of the Gospel. This made the state important, but hardly central. The Church still considered itself, not the State, to be carrying the meaning of history. Over time this view eroded. The Church, at least in White America, accepted the role of sponsor to the State, given the belief by many that the *nation* was really the New Israel, *not* the Church. So the Church gradually became a chaplain, a mere adjunct of the power structure itself. Its job was to focus on the "spiritual needs" of people, many of whom came to live as if the bulk of life could be understood and navigated without referencing God. Most sectors of the temporal world could now be understood apart from the formative power of the Christian story, the latter serving a primarily psychological and ceremonial role. Religion was consigned to the private world where it could not challenge behavior required by the "real" world. As Rodney Clapp said, "it bec[ame] fine and commendable for professing Christians to participate in the state and other realms of culture *as if* the lordship of Christ made no concrete difference." (*A Peculiar People*, p. 26. His italics.)

So here we are, despite the triumphalism of those who see a "Christian Nation" right around the corner. Institutional Christianity has now been in service to various ideologies for so long that it is all but redundant. This is not to say that there aren't plenty of Christians living faithfully. Revival will come by way of these people at the grassroots if it comes at all. But we cannot trust the so-called "leadership." They are too busy with self-protection and serving the shrillest of their constituents. We must pray that godly leaders might emerge. In the meantime, since all else has failed, the rank and file just might be forced to follow Jesus again.

In the Name...