

What Will People Think?

Romans 14, selected (Msg) 1 Corinthians 8:12-13 (CEV)

As I've told you before, when I'm in this position I'm speaking as much to myself as to anyone else. They call it "preaching", but the unfortunate connotation of the word "preaching" is that it is someone telling everyone else how to live their lives – with, of course, the authority of God on their side.

So, as long as you understand this – understand that I'm talking to "us" not to just to "you", this morning, I may get what may seem to be a little personal. And, in order for this to work, we're all also going to have to get a little honest. If, as we proceed, the "shoe fits", as they say, we – you and me – can put it on and know that it is the Holy Spirit that is fitting the shoe, and not some meddling preacher who's getting a little bolder because he's taking off for the woods soon.

Here is the first question:

- 1) "How important are appearances to you?" Honestly! How important to you, to me, is what other people think of us?

I know for my parents' generation, appearances were extremely important. I'm afraid I've been infected by that virus as well. How could I not be, since I grew up in the atmosphere of "What will people think?" That question was often heard around the house. I never knew exactly who those "people" might be, exactly, but I assumed they were people from our church since that was the only community I really knew well as a child. Church-type people, especially, are very big on using this generic "people" thing.

"People are saying" is used often when complaints are in the air. If others are with us, it bolsters our position. It's not "Betty and Sam are saying, ... it's "people." It's never "my group of friends are saying" ... it's always "people." We never divulge who those people are, but the impression is given that there is a huge groundswell ready to descend on Liberty Square, determined to topple the ecclesiastical dictatorship that is taking our church in a direction that doesn't suit us.

I remember well in a previous congregation being confronted by a church official who pulled that number on me. I'll call him "Frank." After being told about a situation, Frank said: "And it's not just me, you know. 'People' are saying..." I wanted to know who these "people" were that were complaining about the same thing Frank was complaining about. I said, "Frank – you're going to have to tell me who those "people" are. I can't deal with nameless, faceless people and effectively address their concerns. I need to know." After much squirming, sputtering and red-facedness he told me. Apart from his wife and mother-in-law, there were *two* other people. (So it wasn't a terrorist cell group forming in the shadows.) I got the name of the one and found out the other had moved away.

I went to see to see the one who was still in the area. She was shocked when I told her that I was there to address her concerns. She didn't have any. She had said nothing about that subject to Frank, and couldn't understand why *he* would have said

anything. (So immediately one starts to wonder why the stories didn't mesh.) It was a profitable pastoral visit, however. After a cup of tea, a visit, some prayer, she gave me a ticket to the Arts Centre for a comedy night.

I guess Frank had taken a chance that I wouldn't follow through. Or else, the theatre ticket was a guilt offering. Either way it was one of the few times I've ever been able to find out who "those people" actually were. Usually one has to guess: is it one, or two? Are they related to the one who's complaining. Is it fifty? Are they the type of people who would be disgruntled even if the Apostle Paul had been called as their pastor, or are they reasonable, sensitive, compassionate followers of the Way? It sure helps to make judgments when one has information about the source.

So, wondering what "people" will think without knowing who these people are is a bit of a problem. And why are we wondering what these "people" think? Are we wondering for their benefit or for ours? Is it all bound up with the enhancement of our own egos, our self esteem, how we are perceived? Or, is "appearance" something over which we have control and can adjust, not for self-gratification, but to help others on their pathway of faith?

This is where the second question comes in, and it's based on all of us having answered that first question about how important "appearances are to us." What was your answer? You don't have to tell me or whisper to your neighbour. But, if anyone said "not important at all", please just go home after the service and destroy all mirrors and reflective surfaces, and in the process admit that you weren't being honest with yourself. Probably, most of us range from "somewhat important", through "quite important", to "very important". There even may be some, who, with careful analysis have to answer "inordinately, all-consumingly important." If so – thanks for your honesty. We probably already knew.

So here's question 2:

- 2) Why are appearances important to us? Why do we care about what people think? Is it about us? Or is it about them?

I remember clearly wondering why my parents would attend a movie theatre in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, but not in Ottawa. You see – as some of you know I was raised in a no smoking, no drinking, no dancing, no movies, no TV, no card playing regimen. So far, at 70, I have maintained innocence in the cards area. I don't know a Queen from a Jack! And it's not that I'm too old to learn, but I rather enjoy having one notch of moral superiority carved on my belt – even if it *is* just an illusion!

The rationale behind the purity code under which I was raised was really not based not on how some action looked - "looking morally good". Rather it was based on not wanting to be a stumbling block to anyone around who might become trapped in sin because of something we did, or appeared to do. As Christians we needed to set the example, not only in actual actions but also in understanding the perception that is created when we do certain things. In a sense it is very much in line with Paul's thinking about eating meat that had been offered to idols, which was the basis for our reading today. Referring to this, Michael Piazza from the cathedra; of Hope in Dallas (commenting on 1 Corinthians 10:14-33) said:

So, we now are back to Paul talking about eating meat that has been offered to idols. (Although in the Romans passage we read earlier where he makes it

basically a matter of conscience) ...this time, he essentially prohibits it, referencing the sacred feasts (communion) in which Christians participate. He says, basically, that you can't do both. Ironically, just after saying, "you cannot partake," Paul writes, "'All things are lawful,' but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful,' but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of others." (1 Cor. 10:23) Paul keeps insisting that "all things are lawful" but then proceeds to lay down a bunch of rules for what Christians should and should not do.

In our minds, it easily can feel as though Paul simply is replacing the Jewish law with a Christian law. Certainly, the fundamentalist churches in which many of us grew up have treated much of the writings of Paul in the same ways the fundamentalist Jews of Jesus' day treated the "writings of Moses." Paul is trying to push back against that. What he sees himself writing are principles and teachings and truths, not laws.

In this passage, the principle he is trying to convey is that, while it may be morally legal for us to do some things, it violates the core principle of common courtesy, consideration and sensitivity to do them. ... He doesn't want his behavior to "offend Jews, Greeks or the church of God." (v. 32) His concern is that his behavior not be an impediment to those who might otherwise be open to hearing the good news (gospel) of God's love.

That would not be a bad guiding principle for modern progressive Christians. ...ⁱ

The reading from Romans 14 that Simon presented from the Message, is a wonderful paraphrase of this whole dilemma that was such an early Church discussion – the eating of meat that had been offered to idols. It was a big problem, occupied much of Paul's writings, and had a lot to do with "what people would think."

So where does that all leave us? All things are lawful. All things are holy. But not all things are beneficial. Some things may lead someone astray, but in themselves are harmless.

I'm sure that Mom and Dad went to Family rated movies, and no one in Fort Lauderdale would have said "I see Lloyd and Carrie go to the movies, so it must be all right for me" and as a result head off to a triple X flick. In Ottawa, it might be quite different because they were well known in the community. Now, sixty years later where even Christianity Today, a conservative evangelical magazine actually reviews movies it's probably not an issue for any of the fundamentalist churches anymore.

I originally questioned their integrity when I was younger, but I now understand the principle. It was a "meat offered to idols" kind of thing that wouldn't have harmed them in the least, ... because it's just meat, after all. But, if you were of the mindset that movies were an evil influence, some of which I think still are, by the way, you can understand what seemed to my folks to be an act that might send the wrong message to someone struggling with knowing what is good and what isn't. It would be a poor witness to their faith in Christ.

I enjoy a glass of wine. But if I know that this will be a stumblingblock for someone who is fighting an alcohol addiction, I won't take that glass. It no longer is part of my personal "purity code" to abstain from alcohol, but I sure will do so if there's any chance it will cause one of Christ's followers, or *anyone* to stumble. I am sure that's why Paul said:

"... if I hurt one of the Lord's followers by what I eat, I will never eat meat as long as I live." ¹ Corinthians 8:13 CEV

Somewhere I heard about this marble pillared church in the south located directly across from a University. It was back in the 60's, the days when the churches were full, and the purity-dress code was in effect. (You know, dresses, hats, gloves for the women. Ties, jackets for men) It was also the "hippy" days, and one Sunday – either a student or a hippy, or a combination of both, ambled in somewhat after the service had started. There were some seats available in some of the pews, but no one offered to move. In fact the chill in the air was palpable. Appearances, eh? This long haired, barefoot, jeaned and tie-dyed person didn't fit here. The further down the aisle he walked, the more it seemed the congregation involuntarily closed ranks.

The young man finally ended up at the front. No more seats, so he moved a little to one side and sat cross-legged on the floor. There was a hushed silence. This didn't look the least bit "proper". In fact it wasn't fitting for this marble-pillared church for the elite of town. An old white haired rather frail man, a somewhat austere-looking elder in the church stood up, pushed his way out of his seat and walked towards the young hippy-student. It felt like everyone was holding their breath. Even the minister had paused to watch what was about to happen.

The elder got within three feet of the young man, and slowly, painfully, lowered himself so that he too was seated on the floor.

What will people say? What will people think? What will God say? What will God think?

Is it about us? Or is it about the other? How willing are we to adjust how we act, what we do, so that others are made to feel welcome, comfortable, and experience Christ's love? And I'm not just talking about in our church. I'm talking about in our lives. What are we willing to sacrifice of what is perfectly legitimate for us, but might harm another? Last week Pastor Kim rolled out our tag line: God loves ALL. So do we. I think this whole "what will people think" helps us to really come to grips with what this looks like. What *does* the "So do we" look like?

Which brings us to our third question:

3) Are we willing to sacrifice 'appearance' for the sake of love?

To what extent? What of our own contrived image or of what we've built around us are we willing to adjust so that others see Jesus, and not ourselves. Which of our pet opinions and perceptions can we let go of, in order that the greater picture of Christ's community of love may be realized? Think about it! Amen.

ⁱ Michael Piazza, founder of The Cathedral of Hope – United Church of Christ, and President: Hope for Peace and Justice in his daily blog: H4PJ Liberating Word, February 16 2011