

‘The Church vs Planet Fitness’
Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper
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based on Romans 14:1-12 and Matthew 18:21-35

Please pray with me:

Loving God, today we come before you struggling with the idea of judgment. We know we’re not perfect. We judge. We condemn. We complain. ... And so we come to you today seeking to love and be loved. We come to you seeking your grace. Amen.

Has anyone seen the Planet Fitness commercials on television that says: “The world judges. We don't. It's why we call our clubs the Judgment Free Zone, a unique environment in which anyone can escape Judgment and be free.”

I want to take offense at that. How can Planet Fitness get away with being a Judgment Free Zone and not the church?

Why can't we use that slogan? “The world judges ... but the church doesn't. That's why churches are called a Judgment Free Zone, an environment where everyone is loved.”

Why can't the church say that?

Well, we can (and we might even believe it!) ... but I'm not sure we wouldn't be convicted by the power of public opinion. Try as we might the church can't seem to avoid being typecast as judgmental and somehow superior to mere secular mortals.

The church has this reputation of perceiving itself as Herculean, with no need for Planet Fitness, while most people feel more like Popeye before eating a can of spinach.

Whether we intend to or not, the church sets itself up to be judgmental. The very question, “Are you saved?” leads people to believe one is either in ... or out ... of the inner circle of salvation; depending on the answer.

A much better question would be: “Where are you on the journey?”

The early church in Rome must have also struggled with the idea of judgment and how people thought in order to be a member of Christ's church somehow you had to be perfect ALL THE TIME!

You had to go to the gym every single day; work out for 2-3 hours at a time; never cheat on your diet; and be faithful to your workout commitment.

Not even an occasional M&M ... just carrot juice and protein powder. No cheating ... no backsliding.

Perfect? Hardly. What the Apostle Paul did advocate for was honesty and authenticity in all our relationships ... especially with Jesus!

Paul didn't want people to judge others as to whether or not they were worthy of God's grace ... that was up to God.

The Apostle Paul told the new church to not pass judgment on others who God has welcomed into the life of the church.

We are not to set ourselves up to be judge ... our job is to welcome and walk with those aching to know Jesus as their source for hope.

For Paul, we are not to make others accountable to us ... but accountable to God!

The thing of it is ... *we know this!* We know the Bible says, “Judgment is mine sayeth

the Lord.” Yet, the court of public opinion convicts us over and over again.

The reason for this may be embedded in our Gospel lesson today in Matthew.

Jesus offers a parable about how the kingdom of heaven could be compared to a king who offers mercy to a slave who owes him *a lot* of money ... and because the slave begs for mercy, and makes the king a promise, the king forgives the debt.

You would think that slave would have left feeling blessed and relieved! Yet when he comes across another slave who owes him a *small* amount of money ... rather than sharing the blessing of forgiveness the king just bestowed, he throws the debtor into prison. No compassion, no mercy, no forgiveness.

The king hears about it and brings the slave in to face the music and is judged to have failed the mercy test. The slave is convicted by the king for being unmerciful after being shown mercy.

The slave betrayed the only thing we are asked to do in the Lord’s Prayer ... and that is to forgive those who have trespassed against us.

Jesus ends the parable by saying the same fate will happen to us if we do not forgive our brother or sister ... from our heart.

That parable places the responsibility of passing on God’s mercy to all who have received mercy. Those acts of mercy are to be free of judgment.

The Apostle Paul tells us we are called to live to Christ ... and writes: “... each of us will be accountable to God” therefore “forgive your brother or sister from your heart” and you will be saved.

How do we fix our image as a judgmental institution? What can we do to exhibit compassion and mercy as our governing ethic?

Since 1982 a group of United Methodists, known as the Reconciling Ministries Network, made a covenant with one another to work to reconcile the tension within The United Methodist Church over the full inclusion of all persons into the life of the church. In some ways, those in 1982 must have asked themselves those same questions we have posed this morning. [How can we fix our image as a judgmental institution? and What can we do to exhibit compassion and mercy as our governing ethic?]

The covenant formed in 1982 attempts to confront the tension within The United Methodist Church because the church was (and is) considered by many to be judgmental and unmerciful to those who identify as Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgendered and Queer.

It is this tension within The United Methodist Church ... that sets us up to be perceived as judgmental.

The denomination has chosen to make the disagreement about human sexuality the issue that we’re willing to die for.

The debate over human sexuality has been tied to the idea of salvation thereby making it an issue of judgment. The question, “Are you saved?” becomes toxic. At the heart of the disagreement within many Christians (not just The United Methodists) is the idea that homosexuality excludes one from salvation.

The debate rages ... and as it rages, it continue to support the belief of public opinion the church is a judgmental institution. It is NOT a Judgment Free Zone. You have to go to Planet Fitness for that.

When the Apostle Paul said, “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to

ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

That means the tension between life and death isn't at all about the human constructs of human sexuality but about how God's goodness and mercy through Jesus saves us from being judge and jury.

In Jesus' parable, the first servant who experienced such gracious forgiveness of his debt should have turned around and offered the same to those indebted to him. But he did not. Rather, he faced the judgment of the king.

We were talking in Bible Study on Monday that each of us who seek to find God in our lives explores different paths. My path is not the same as your path ... yet we all strive to find God. We all ache to know Jesus as our source for hope.

To deny access to another's path is wrong. And that is what we are doing as a denomination when we deny ordination and yes, even membership, to our GLBTQ friends.

You can bet ... Planet Fitness will not deny membership to anyone seeking to belong.

God never leaves us without hope.

God's merciful goodness and Jesus' compassion gifts us with a voice. Our voices should speak loud and clear the church is not called to judge, rather is called to:

celebrate God's presence,

to love and serve others,

to seek justice and resist evil,

to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, *our judge AND our hope.*

And that voice in the midst of all the noise of public opinion ... is to be vocal advocates that strive to build the kingdom of heaven that forgives trespasses ... just as we are to forgive those who trespass against us.

In that way it is not our voice that will condemn us ... but our silence.

Amen.