

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Sep 5th 2015

Brothers and sisters:

You once were alienated and hostile in mind because of evil deeds;

God has now reconciled you in the fleshly Body of Christ through his death. Colossians 1

God is my helper; the Lord sustains my life. Psalm 54

Some Pharisees said, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the sabbath?" Luke 6

Today's gospel story is a marvelous example of what can go wrong with religion. These Pharisees, who don't violate a single part of the law, are lacking in the heart of the spirit of what the law is there to support. They are judgmental and lacking in compassion or charity.

Someone was relating to me, some time ago, their distain for a person in his parish who had an affair and almost ruined his marriage. After he went on for some time, I asked him which was the more troubling sin: to have had an affair or to harshly judge the person who had the affair? The person later told me that my question transformed his reading of the gospel.

Jesus asks us to be merciful. He clearly isn't saying he doesn't care about morality or obedience. Jesus' whole life and ministry was a lesson for us on how to respond to sin. The same law-abiding Pharisees were quite upset because Jesus "ate and drank with sinners." They were upset because he enjoyed the presence of sinners and he must have had a great time being with them. The Pharisees would have argued that Jesus should have shunned these people and that his presence and care for these sinners seemed to condone their lives. These Pharisees didn't understand that love heals. Love forgives sin. And, love builds a community of love and mercy.

Pope Francis calls us to be a community which builds bridges rather than walls, because this is what Jesus teaches us, with his words and example. It can be easy to think that "being religious" defines those who are "inside" and those who are "outside." Pope Francis is helping us hear Jesus' message that being religious defines those who are merciful and compassionate, the way God is. Francis tells us that mercy is evangelical. Being merciful shares the good news of God's mercy. It lives out our faith that God's mercy, shared with us in Jesus, is present in our own acts of mercy.

There are already very religious people criticizing Pope Francis for his emphasis on mercy and his care for the poor and the environment. Some think he should be doing more condemning and finger pointing. Pope Francis will speak at the United Nations in a few weeks and will address a joint session of the U.S. Congress, and will preach at several Masses while in the U.S. We can all pay attention to his words about mercy - which will likely be challenging to a false "religious" sense, which lacks compassion on the sick, the poor and the stranger, and harshly judges the sinner. He will likely be criticized by today's Pharisees who just don't like that message about God's love or our call to love the way we've been loved.

Let us give thanks for the love of our God who has reconciled each of us, in our own sinfulness, and

remains our help and sustains our lives. Let us share that love, freely, generously. with growing compassion and mercy.

Andy Alexander, S.J.-Creighton University's Collaborative Ministry Office