

One of the truisms of life is that you can't judge a book by its cover. Things are not always what they seem. I read a delightful story, allegedly true, about a zoo in Spain that decided to conduct an emergency drill. The drill simulated how to handle it if a gorilla escaped from its enclosure. To make the drill more realistic, a zookeeper dressed up as a gorilla and took off loping through the zoo.

Unfortunately, not everyone on staff was notified about the drill. Upon seeing a "gorilla" fleeing from its cage, one of the zoo veterinarians grabbed a tranquilizer gun and shot the employee in the leg.

"Well," he said, "it looked like a gorilla was escaping!" (1)

You can't always judge a book by its cover. Some things are not as they might appear.

There is an intriguing legend known as "The White Witch of Rosehall." It is a tale of a beautiful woman named Annie Palmer who used her unparalleled beauty to lure wealthy men to marry her. Nothing unusual about that. However, each time Annie married someone, she found a way to convince him to add her to his will and then she would poison him. She continued to poison him even as she pretended to be nursing him back to health. The men would die, leaving her their estate. As a consequence she became quite wealthy. She was known as the "white witch" because of her alluring appearance of virtue on the outside, but her thoroughly evil nature on the inside. Perhaps you have known someone like that.

In our lesson for the day, the Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law had come from Jerusalem to "investigate" Jesus. On the outside these Pharisees were the epitome of respectability. On the inside, however, they were full of fear and envy, and they were growing in their hatred for Jesus. They looked for any excuse to cast aspersion on him and his followers.

On this particular day, they observed some of Jesus' disciples eating food without first washing their hands. This, of course, offended them. Understand . . . this wasn't about sanitation. There was no sign around saying employees MUST wash their hands. It wasn't about preventing germs. They knew nothing about germs in those days. Instead, this was about maintaining a religious tradition. In fact, Mark pauses for a moment and explains to his Gentile audience living outside of Palestine, the Jewish practice of ceremonial washing.

"Unclean," the Greek word is *koinais*, as Mark explained it, meant "ceremonially unwashed." It was a technical term among Jews denoting whatever was contaminated according to their religious rituals and thus was unfit to be called holy or devoted to God. Unclean could refer to practices or to people.

One of my favorite, all time TV shows was "Law and Order." I loved the New York sassy style, the cultural tensions, and of course the crucial moment when the truth

finally came out. But the phrase, Law and Order, also represented a trend in law enforcement that began in the late 1970s, in reaction to the crazy drug and crime years of the 60s and 70s. Three strikes you are out. Throw the bum in jail and throw away the key. The law is the law, make them pay.

Now that we have the largest percentage, by far, of imprisoned people compared to every other nation—including China—we hear the same ideas put forward with regard to immigration. They broke our law. They are illegal. Throw them out of the country. One candidate even wants drone strikes over the border.

Certainly law is key. I've been mugged three times and it's not a comfortable feeling, I can assure you. But is law the only thing. We have a classic passage from the book of Deuteronomy—the name in Greek means "The Second Book of Laws"—that espouses the classic viewpoint of much of Jewish thinking: keep the law and things will go well. Break the law and you will be cursed.

But can we know the law absolutely? Can we know how the law applies in every moment? Is there a law that always applies? Jesus' approach to law in the Gospel would seem like a complete scandal to the standard Jewish viewpoint. How could his disciples not be doing what the law required? "Why do your disciples not wash their hands before eating?" Jesus responds by saying that not all law is the same. Requirements of tradition are one thing; getting to the heart of things is something else

The most common ritual cleansing was the washing of one's hands before eating food. For a loyal Jew to disregard this regulation was a sin. You and I might say that these disciples were engaging in unsanitary behavior when they did not wash their hands before eating. In the Pharisees' minds, though, Jesus' disciples were indulging in sinful behavior when they did not wash their hands.

Let's pause for a moment and acknowledge that this tradition of ritual cleansing probably had a positive effect on the health of the Jews that observed it. It is fascinating, isn't it, how some of the Jewish ceremonial laws protected them from disease? This was one of those cases. But protecting their health was not why they washed their hands before eating. It was because they were keeping the tradition of their fathers. And Jesus' disciples were not observing those traditions.

. In truth they were holding fast to human traditions rather than to God's commands. But Jesus was not interested in the Pharisees' theology, but in their hypocrisy.

It is clear that Jesus was not concerned about outward appearance but inner integrity. "These people honor me with their lips," he said, citing Isaiah, "but their hearts are far from me."

Pastor David Yarbrough says that when he was in Bible College he met an interesting young man by the name of Shannon. What made Shannon interesting was his looks. His hair was a different color each week, his ears were loaded with earrings, and he wore big, loose grunge-style clothing. But the most interesting point of his appearance was his shorts . . . and he always wore shorts regardless of the weather. What made his shorts so odd was the way he wore them. You see, he always wore his shorts backwards. That's right--he wore his shorts backwards. As you can imagine, anyone who dressed like that at a Bible College stuck out like a sore thumb.

One day, says Yarbrough, he couldn't stand it any longer and his judgmental sarcasm got the best of him. He had to make a crack about Shannon's shorts. To his surprise Shannon was ready for his criticism. Shannon turned to him and said politely, "I'll tell you . . . just like I tell everyone else who asks me why I wear my shorts backwards. I tell them that God turned my life around so fast that my shorts couldn't keep up." Did you catch that? "God turned my life around so fast that my shorts couldn't keep up." Quite an interesting response. (2)

Have you ever been guilty of judging a person by their outward appearance? Do some of you remember thirty or forty years ago when the easiest way to give certain middle age men a near stroke was to introduce them to a young male with long hair?

Anybody remember Archie Bunker and his son-in-law whom he called "Meathead"? One of the reasons Archie despised his son-in-law was his appearance--long hair and hippie dress. Nowadays if you watch a Gaither's concert on television, a veritable bastion of southern white conservative culture, some of the singers look very much like "Meathead." How stupid we were 40 years ago when we got so upset about how young people looked.

Do you suspect that 40 years from now, people like us, church people, will realize how ridiculous our generation was to ostracize young people for such things as tattoos and piercings?

For us Christians, Jesus is the standard. How he lived for his Father, expressed the Holy Spirit, and gave himself selflessly for others—this is the law of Christ, and the law that always obtains. The letter of James, written from a Jewish-Christian perspective, says that the way we show compassion and love is the heart of our following

God. "This is undefiled and pure religion, to serve the needs of the poor, the widows and orphans." That is, to care for people who have no way else to receive care.

We Catholics have something else to add to this conversation. For we believe that, even if what goes into the body does not make us unclean, still what goes into the body can make us immaculate. For we receive the body and blood of Jesus, take Christ into our very selves, not because we are worthy, but because Christ can make us worthy by forming us in his image every time we receive communion. Sure, it's more than the eating. Unless we eat the Eucharist in faith, we are hardly receiving it. But if we are receiving it with growing faith, then the One who kept the law perfectly, Jesus Christ, progressively becomes our heart.

Our tendency to judge people by their appearance is a symptom of our estrangement from them. It is by getting to know people person-to-person that we are able to get beyond appearances.

In her book *The Shelter of Each Other*, Dr. Mary Pipher suggests that our obsession with appearance stems from our lack of relationships with those in our community. When people lived in smaller communities, they often had deep relationships with those around them. They knew about their neighbors' families, health conditions, religion and values, habits and needs. Because people knew each other on a deeper and broader level, they didn't need to judge one another on appearances.

But today, we are less likely to know our neighbors, our sales clerks, pharmacists, bus drivers, colleagues, and so on. When that happens we begin to judge each other by external appearances. We know nothing about the people we interact with on a daily basis beyond what they show us on the outside. In a disconnected society, we place less emphasis on internal values, like character, and more emphasis on external values, like looks. (5)

One man tells about working at a club on the weekend of the biggest motorcycle gathering of the year in his town. When the roaring machines pulled up outside, the patrons of the club turned their eyes toward the door and conversation turned into uneasy whispering. A group of the tough-looking bikers came into the club. He says one of them walked up to him and asked him where the phone was. He pointed it out, and the silence in the room let everybody overhear what the biker said into the receiver. "Hi, Mom," the biker said. "Just want to let you know I'll be home late tonight." (6)

If we could look beyond the outer appearances and see every stranger as someone's son, someone's daughter, what a difference it would make.

Everything looks great on the outside, but inside they're hurting, they're needy, they're lonely, they're afraid. Like Annie Palmer, "The White Witch of Rosehall," they need to reconcile their inner nature and to bring it into alignment with their outer nature. Maybe that's true of you and me as well. Maybe on the outside you look like you've got it altogether, but on the inside you are a mess. Maybe it's time you made a new start. You can, you know. With God's help, you can begin living out the values you truly feel on the inside.

"These people honor me with their lips," said Jesus, "but their hearts are far from me." How is your heart? Does it reflect the heart of Jesus? And be careful of judging on the basis of outward appearances. Get to know people and you may discover that the person who looks like they don't belong is actually a child of God.

1. thedodo.com. Cited in *Reader's Digest* (Reader's Digest USA).
2. <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/look-before-you-label-david-yarbrough-sermon-on-jesus-teachings-38024.asp>.
3. *Carpe Mañana: Is Your Church Ready to Seize Tomorrow?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).
4. <http://www.stjohnsolney.org/sermons/20020310.html>.
5. Mary Pipher, Ph.D., *The Shelter of Each Other* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1996), p. 85.
6. The Funnies, andychaps_the?funnies?subscribe@egroups.com.
7. Ron Lee Davis with James D. Denney, *Mistreated* (Portland: Multnomah, 1989).