

“Anyone who takes away your coat . . .”

Luke 6:27-38

This is the setting for Jesus’ sermon. Luke 6:17-19 . . . ¹⁷He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then Jesus began his sermon. I have read this sermon and preached on this sermon many times over the past 34 years. But this week’s portion of that sermon really slapped me in the face as it never has before. Let me tell you the story.

On the second Sunday in December, over 2 months ago, we had the Christmas presents loaded from the giving tree, the bags of clothing from the crate in the fellowship hall, all 11 of our confirmands, some of their parents, and Karen Hearld. We made the annual journey to the Redeemer Crisis Center to deliver our treasures and to serve the working poor, the homeless, the elderly, and the mentally ill a Christmas meal.

Debbie Youngman delivered several trays of home-baked turkey. Chris Jasko and Al DiCarlo were in the kitchen preparing the dressing, stuffing, and corn. Some of our youth and parents were setting up for the meal while others were carrying boxes of clothes and food from upstairs storage to downstairs distribution. I was visiting with folks coming in from the cold.

I was sitting at a back table visiting with an 87 year old woman named Florence or Flo. She wasn't typical for this group. Flo lives in Parma and drives her car to various meals in churches during the week.

She has been to our community meal that we serve quarterly in our fellowship hall. Flo was telling me stories of her grandchildren and one of her great-granddaughters in high school. She knew everyone at her table.

Our youth were lined up ready to serve the food so I got up to give thanks for the Browns victory over the Panthers. Then we prayed a prayer of thanksgiving for the servers, for the food, for the Crisis Center, and for the people gathered to share a meal.

When everyone had gotten through the line and were back at their tables enjoying their meal, I happened to look over at the shelf where I and another volunteer had stacked our coats. My Indians coat was gone.

The Indians coat was given to me as a gift about 10 years ago by Fay Maldari. I wear it about half the time during the winter months.

Since Chief Wahoo has been outlawed, I am suddenly getting reactions to this coat by total strangers in public places. When I walk into a restaurant or a grocery store, people give me a thumbs up and say "nice jacket".

When I was walking into the crisis center that night with Karen Hearld right behind me, an elderly man, mentally ill with a severe speech defect, grabbed a hold of the front of my jacket, and said "I miss you pastor. I want your coat." I said, "I missed you too but you can't have my coat!"

Now the coat was gone. I quickly surveyed the room, especially where he was sitting, and didn't see it. Maybe somebody took it and headed out to the street. On my way to the stairs I told two of our confirmands, Logan Mudra and Mason Brunecz that someone took my coat, so be on the lookout.

Before I could get to the staircase, Logan came running toward me and said, "I found your coat. A woman at the back table was stuffing it into her bag. I told my mom and she went and got it from her". The great-grandson of Sheriff Mudra.

As I made my way back into the meal, sure enough, Chris was walking toward me with my coat. Chris pointed out to me the culprit sitting at the same table I'd been sitting at talking with Flo. Jeff told me to put my coat in the kitchen where the real men hang their coats.

I made my way to the back table. She had her hand on her forehead hiding her eyes while she ate with her right hand. Not able to make eye contact, I asked her why she took my coat. She replied matter-of-factly, "you shouldn't have left it lying around". I told her that we came to serve them a nice meal and we needed our coats for the ride home. She suddenly looked up and realized I was the pastor. She began sobbing violently and through her tears repeating over and over – "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry . . ."

I told her I forgave her and walked away. She finished her meal and left with the man sitting across from her, still crying.

I went back to the table and sat back down next to Flo who pointed to her head and said, "You know she's mentally ill, but she knows the difference between right and wrong."

Flo went on. “Social Services recently tried to reunite her with her teenage daughter but it only lasted a couple of weeks and they put her back into foster care. Her husband was sitting across the table from her but I’ve watched her make out with other men in front of him. It’s sad.”

Karen and Charles Parsons were riding with me on the way back. I was wondering if I should have reacted differently.

Now I read Jesus’ sermon in today’s gospel text and I know I should have reacted differently. It’s just a coat. I know what Fay would have done.

Luke 6:27-31. . . ²⁷But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you.

The very next morning, Monday morning, an older man not dressed well, comes into my office to tell me he’s living out of his pick-up and his gas light is on. Is there anything he can do around the church to earn some gas money? I listened to his very depressing life story. I retrieved a \$15 Get Go gift card from the office and gave it to him. He was very thankful.

While he was in my office, a woman came to Loretta’s office asking if she could begin making prayer shawls. She wanted to be a part of giving prayer shawls to people who are in crisis, especially with health issues. I wondered if I should have offered a prayer shawl to the man living in his truck in the middle of winter. I didn’t think of it at the time but then I read Jesus’ sermon.

Luke 6:32-36 . . . ³²If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.

Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

As I get older and approach a new decade, I find myself becoming more judgmental and I hate it. All these years I've been teaching Stephen Ministers, confirmation students, couples preparing for marriage or trying to survive marriage, Bible study participants, people listening to my sermons – do not judge others.

When an alcoholic who just lost his job comes to the food pantry for help – do not judge others.

When a single mother who is working full-time and raising two children by herself comes to me for help to pay her electric bill from our discretionary fund – do not judge others.

When a confirmation student wants to affirm his baptism but has trouble staying focused in class – do not judge others.

When 87 year old Flo gets in her car to drive to various churches each week for free meals and fellowship – do not judge others.

When a man living out of his truck comes into our church in search of a Get Go gas card – do not judge others.

When our parents, grandparents, and pastor begin to age and can't remember names and words like they use to – do not judge others.

When our friends or children are addicted to drugs and some close to us die from overdoses – do not judge others.

When two-thirds of most congregations, including Divinity, choose not to worship with us – do not judge others.

When congregations no longer have Sunday schools and are dependent on their endowment fund to keep their doors open – do not judge others.

When a woman is condemned for sleeping with a man she's not married to – do not judge others.

When we disagree with another person about global warming, about our troops being stationed in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, about supporting our president – do not judge others.

When a person is a Muslim or a Hindu or a Jew or an atheist or a Steelers fan – do not judge others.

Luke 6:37-38 . . . ³⁷Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

May the peace of God . . .