

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

October 21, 2013 at 10:47am

Hypocrisy or grace understood?

by Mariam Williams

At the Intersection

I once called Facebook "a great relationship barometer." People are known to share what's on their minds and in their hearts. The message can be cryptic, requiring some reading between the lines, but the truth of how people feel is there, unafraid of exposure, perhaps oblivious to judgment.

I have a friend whose glaringly transparent status updates and posts on Facebook make me wonder about my own relationship with God. She may champion her homemaking skills and femininity by sharing a photo of her expertly decorated and cleaned bathroom or a photo of herself in little more than six-inch stilettos. Within the same week, I could read about her DUI charge after cussing someone out in a parking lot, see a prayer for her family, or find a reference to the naked twerk video she made for her boyfriend.

One day she shared this:

"Giving God praise. Some may say I'm a hypocrite or fake because I say I love Him yet I cuss, fornicate, (fill in the blank). But I say I'm real because I admit my faults, am thankful for his grace, mercy and forgiveness, and I strive to be better and try not to judge you for your sins because I'm no better than you. I know I need Him. And I know he meets us all where we are, so don't let ANYBODY SEPERATE YOU FROM HIM. YOU'RE WORTHY OF HIS LOVE, TOO!!!!!"

And I wondered if she "gets it" and I'm the one not maximizing God's grace or if she's a hypocrite.

God doesn't give us grace so we can continue to sin without any effort toward improvement. Paul makes it clear in Romans that wasn't the purpose of Christ's death and resurrection. But he's also clear that

nothing can separate us from God's love and that flawed people -- adulterers, murderers, con artists, liars, people who have done worse than cuss someone out in a parking lot -- make it into the Faith Hall of Fame (Hebrews 11). So how do we get stuck on judging other people's behavior?

I think it happens for two reasons: 1) We can pay less attention to our flaws, including personality flaws affecting our relationship with others, by focusing on someone else's actions; and 2) While an individual's relationship with God is personal, behavior is public, and what people who openly wear the label "Christian" do reflects what people think Christ is like.

With a status update like that, I think most people will see God's mercy and forgiveness, and my question as to whether or not my friend is a hypocrite is dismissed. But whether or not I understand grace is important because it speaks directly to my relationships with Christian friends, to the atmosphere I help create in my church, and to the work that can then be done through my congregation. My relationships with other Christians have diminished when I feared their judgment. I felt I couldn't share secret pain, and when I wanted godly counsel, I suffered in silence. Christians do the same thing in the church. How can people who don't really know each other love each other? And without such a radical force as love, how can churches be effective?

This is one reason I could nod in agreement last month when Pope Francis encouraged Catholics to stop obsessing over gay marriage, abortion and birth control. (Another reason is because I'm fairly liberal and already thought what he said.*) They are personal judgment fights, and shouting damnation at women walking into an abortion clinic or crowding a Chick-fil-A to show gay people -- some of whom were probably working behind the counter -- that you don't think they should have rights doesn't reflect grace, mercy or radical love and does less for the Gospel's reputation than a status update about a naked twerk video.

*I want to note, I'm Christian but not Catholic. I pay attention to what the pope says because it influences millions of people who are my siblings in Christ and because what he says tends to make the news.

[Mariam Williams is a writer born and raised in Louisville, Ky., where she's received numerous arts awards. When not working in the field of social justice research and taking graduate courses in women and gender and Pan-African studies, she blogs at RedboneAfropuff.com. Follow her on Twitter: @missmariamw.]

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