

At the age of 61, the original Barbie still has her looks and figure. And Barbie's modern-day sisters have perpetuated that perfectly pink, high-heeled, firm-bosomed, (usually) blonde look that the world knows well. But there is a wayward member of the sisterhood hailing from southeastern Australia who shook the world of conventional, fashionable, perfectly-coifed little icons 25 years ago. She is Feral Cheryl, and she's not your mother's Barbie doll.

Cheryl is named for the green extremists of the rain-forest region of Australia known as the "Ferals." She is a "natural doll" who wears her alternative lifestyle with pride. Feral Cheryl is neither blonde nor is she skinny or scrawny, and not a thread of pink polyester will ever touch her anatomically correct body. Her style includes tattoos, dreadlocks interwoven with real glass beads, and assorted piercings. Her wardrobe consists of a single simple outfit, with no accessories except for a handmade, crocheted, rainbow dime bag with some kind of herb inside it that smells a bit like basil. Some might say she is Very hip. Very cool.

While Barbie is a politically correct woman, dabbling in every career from being a veterinarian, to a pilot, to a professional volleyball player, Feral Cheryl simply hangs out. While Barbie can be seen wearing a swimsuit, astronaut uniform, or scuba diving gear, Feral Cheryl wears only a carefree skirt and a cloth strip top. Barbie gets around in an array of vehicles from a Mustang convertible to Holiday Camper; Feral Cheryl walks everywhere she goes, unhampered by the stiletto heels Barbie often prefers. While Barbie is cranked out in Asian factories producing hundreds of identical creations each day, Feral Cheryls are individually made. No two are the same.

Ok.....So what's all this got to do with being a child of God? Plenty, because it can help us to stop and wonder, "What exactly does a child of God, a Saint, look like?" In our second lesson for today St. John suggests that the world "does not

know us" and it's a good bet the church doesn't either. In fact, we don't have, and won't have, a good concept of what our future identities are as children of God until the day we see God face to face.

That leaves us with a lot of room for discussion. Certainly, there is an enormous wardrobe, like the one Barbie has, that we Christians can access to at least "look" like followers of Christ: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, and so on. But non-Christians can don these garments too. Perhaps we are all supposed to look alike. Family members often do bear a striking resemblance to each other. Often, but not always. Many families have Feral Cheryls who insist on drumming in their own circles to a different beat.

Unfortunately, the church too often has a Barbie look to it –full of characters who exude success: Doctor Ken, Stockbroker Barbie, Architect Midge, Soccer Player Skipper, or Computer Consultant Christie. Put these people together and you have a microcosm of the postmodern Church. Very conventional. Very mainstream. Nothing wrong with that. The point is...that the church cannot be defined in conventional political, economic, or social terms. Yet, that is the way we tend to judge the spiritual character of the people who make up the Christ-Body we call the church.

If you don't think that is true, then why all the positive spin when gay rights activist Mel White and evangelist Jerry Falwell sat down several years ago and agreed to tone down the rhetoric coming from their supporters? It made news because Christians who disagree are not in the habit of being particularly civil to each other. Way back in 1999, even Lutherans and Catholics signed a memorandum of understanding concerning the 450 year old spat, give or take, about justification by faith.

Which may make us wonder, Can a pro-choice person be a Christian? Can a pro-life person be a Christian? What about the guy in dreadlocks, the radical chick

with tattoos on her arms and ankles, and rings in her nose and navel? We may not recognize them, but God's children are everywhere. And we are both shockingly different from each other, and often times we are indifferent to one other.

Pastor Ed Dobson a former executive for the Moral majority alleges that The Christian Coalition and "other political groups in America are ... selling their religious priorities for a mess of political pottage and in the process they are harming the gospel." Ed (no relation to James Dobson of Focus on the Family) grumbles that the very term "Christian Coalition" implies "that there is only one correct Christian position on every political issue. Does that mean that if I disagree with a particular position, I am not a true Christian? The Christian Coalition reduces the Christian faith to a series of political positions, and that is the equivalent of theological heresy."

Sounds a lot like faith profiling, a Christian version of racial profiling which has been an issue in our country in the past and still is. These days it is hard to argue against the fact that racial profiling is still a hot social issue, because if police, using certain profiles, pull over more people that fit a certain profile, then they will tend to arrest more people of that racial group, arrests which then are used to justify the practice. This is a circular black hole out of which minority groups can't seem to escape. And yet, similarily, faith profiling is a sin the church has been reluctant to identify, much less repent of.

Recognizing the need to move beyond Barbie and Ken, the Mattel Company did its marketplace homework and made some changes. Teen Barbie Model Michelle brings racial diversity into the neighborhood. Harley Davidson Barbie, bedecked in black leather, may appeal to preadolescent Biker Chicks, although she looks just like Butterfly Art Barbie at a costume party. After months of social distancing because of Covid-19, I find myself wondering if Mattel will create

Quarantine Barbie, similar to the one that blogger Tonya Ruiz has created as a comedic commentary on current events.

As a culture, we, too, revere different and courageous people: protesting people like Martin Luther, risk-taking people like Apple's Steve Jobs, innovative people like Jeff Boros of Amazon.com. Or do we? After all, the individuals on I just mentioned have been accused of being "radical" at one time or another. And while the masses may eventually embrace what was once considered radical and countercultural, the church is slow in appreciating the wild-eyed and woolly in its midst. The Church welcomes revolutionaries about as heartily as the religious elite welcomed Jesus. It's a good bet that Jesus was killed by people excruciatingly similar to us.

Even though the Church is gradually becoming a melting pot of denominations and faith stages and interpretations of Scripture, we nevertheless find comfort in sharing the pews with people who generally look like, act like, dress like, worship like, and who live like ourselves. We especially feel more comfortable with people who sin like us!

God is of course capable of anything. If the Scriptures say that God loves without limits, then we need to take that blessing on faith. The challenge of unconditional love, therefore, lies not with God but with our imperfect ability to conceive and then believe such a possibility. The notion that we are both loved, and lovable, is perhaps the most challenging one that God places before us. This idea dares us not only to accept ourselves as beloved children of God, but also to view every person that we encounter along our life's path as another brother or sister in Christ.

That being said, there is a place for judgment. The apostle John says as much in our text: "Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness." The other litmus test he applies relates to the person and work of Jesus Christ. But making

judgments is a tricky business as Jesus frequently pointed out. God's children, your sisters or brothers, are not those who necessarily look like you, act like you, believe like you, or worship like you. Your other brothers and sisters may not be on the same side of the political fence as you, may not be in the same denomination as you are, may not be protesting the same causes as you, and may not understand God as you do.

The world, John says, does not "know us," and we had better exercise some caution before we start defining who the "us" is. The church is not called to be radically chic, a way cool movement that appeals to everyone. Neither are we called to exclusivity, only inviting those who are special and like us to participate in our worship and praise of our creator. But rather we are called to join God in His mission of reconciliation, and to connect people with the story of His son's act of redemption on the cross.

Instead of trying to decide for ourselves who might be a Christian, or a Saint for that matter, perhaps we should focus on trying to grow more like Christ. And Growing in the image of Christ means finding new ways to share the gospel, speak the truth, serve the poor, heal the sick, and bind up the brokenhearted. It means walking the self-denying, cross-carrying path of discipleship and following Christ's example of eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, loving enemies and turning the other cheek. It means swimming in the gene pool of Jesus, opening ourselves up further to the movement of the Holy Spirit, and allowing ourselves to become ever more effective channels for the ever-flowing love of God.

God knows the difference between a Saint and a Sinner. It is time to stop trying to figure out for ourselves who is in, and who is out! Rather than judging others, we should be trying to feed them literally, as well as spiritually, while also spending time getting to know and trying to be like Jesus. After all, our "Sainthood" doesn't happen after our deaths, but is part of our lives in the present

time! We are connected with our Holy God now, just as we are connected with all the Saints who have gone before us in the faith! So let's focus our attention on helping and feeding the people around us – while remembering that God has already taken care of our Sin! And Thanks be to God for that. Amen.