

Epiphany 7 / February 20, 2022

Luke 6:36

“Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”

One of the aspects of God that is most celebrated in scripture is His mercy. In Psalm 103 the psalmist sings, “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” What does mercy mean to you? For some people, mercy means to be given a second chance. Of course, a second chance comes with the provision that we don’t mess up again. God gave His ancient people more than a second chance. As the psalmist sang, He abounded in steadfast love. Every chance He gave was accompanied by mercy. Mercy for God is much more than another chance. Mercy is God’s kindness expressed in forgiveness, time after time.

Again, in the words of Psalm 103, “He does not deal with us according to our sins nor repay us according to our iniquities...as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to His children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear Him. Justice is when we get what our sins deserve. Mercy is to receive pardon for our sins. Justice and mercy meet in Jesus’ cross, upon which He who had no sin, made Himself an offering for our sins, so that in Him we would receive the mercy of forgiveness, time after time and to eternity. Justice and mercy are expressed fully in Christ our Saviour. In Him we receive not a second or thirty-third chance, but rather the mercy of forgiveness in pardon and peace with our Father in heaven in time and for eternity.

God presented Himself to Israel at Mount Sinai as holy in His being and just in all His actions. He made covenant with Israel through Moses and gave them His law, so that they would live as His people. The law is an expression of God’s nature. Yet He is also merciful, kind and forgiving. He knew no one, even of His own people, is able to be holy as He is holy in all their thoughts, words and actions. He knew we need the mercy of forgiveness. As the Psalmist said, “He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.” Upon giving the law on Mount Sinai, He declared, “The Lord, The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness; keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.” God is holy and just. He punishes sin. He calls us to turn away from unrighteousness. In their very essence sin and unrighteousness are destructive; both to those who live in them and to the larger community.

God is holy and just, but above all else, God is merciful. St. James wrote, “mercy triumphs over judgement.” God calls us from our sins and in our sins, provides us with forgiveness and healing. God’s mercy is displayed in the fullness of its glory in Jesus, who fulfilled the law in our place; and offered Himself on the cross for our forgiveness. St. Peter wrote, “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” In Christ, we are people who receive mercy. In our gospel, Christ in whom we receive the mercy of forgiveness and adoption as sons of God, calls us to live as children of God, by also being merciful towards others.

How merciful are we? Jesus asks some very difficult things in our gospel. Are you up to the task? He asks us to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, to bless those who curse us, to pray for those who abuse us, to offer the other cheek when someone strikes us. He asks us to give when someone takes from us, and to give to everyone who asks anything from us. Is He serious? Ever since Jesus spoke, people have tried to limit His meaning and lessen the effect of His speech. In the medieval church His words were called ‘evangelical counsel.’ That was a high-sounding way of saying Jesus didn’t mean that everyone could or should do what He said. Rather this was voluntary for those who wanted to be superior Christians and earn a better place in heaven. However, Jesus didn’t put any qualifications on His words. He spoke them to all His disciples, without limitation.

In modern times, people have interpreted Jesus’ words as teaching non-violent resistance. The Indian leader Mahatma Ghandi, took Jesus’ words as the basis for His philosophy of passive resistance. The violent oppression of the British Colonial forces was countered, by passive civil disobedience on the part of Indians, who wanted the English occupation to come to an end. As a political weapon it was massively successful. It led to the end of British Colonial rule and the formation of the modern state of India. But Jesus wasn’t advocating any form of resistance. He was preaching total acquiescence to those who misuse us. He is calling us to put our trust in God completely. When Jerusalem was under siege and surrounded by the Babylonian army, the king asked Jeremiah what the Lord wanted him to do. Jeremiah said the Lord wanted him to open the gates and let the invaders enter. God would protect the king and everyone in the city. All the king had to do was to trust the Lord. What do you think the king did?

Jesus' words are beyond difficult. From a human perspective they are impossible to keep. Who could put up with the kind of sustained abuse Jesus' words assume? No one! From a Christian perspective, Jesus' words first and foremost, show us our own need for mercy, by showing us how hard and unforgiving our hearts really are. Consider some of the things you have said and thought about people with whom you disagree, people whom you dislike. How have we responded to people, who have said unkind and hurtful things to us and about us? Consider how kind, forgiving, patient and merciful we have been towards those with whom we have disagreed during this pandemic.

Regardless of how we feel about vaccines, mandates and restrictions, we have all sinned against others, against each other and against God, in our thoughts, with our words and by our actions. How easily and often have we thought and said hurtful and unkind things about others. How often have we expressed those unkind thoughts to others, when we were in a particularly bad mood? Jesus said, "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." Have we been merciful to others, as our heavenly Father is merciful to us?

Jesus' words show us our sin, so that we would turn to God for the mercy of forgiveness. Jesus wants us to be merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful. We begin to be merciful to others by turning first to God for mercy. We begin to forgive one another from the heart when we first receive in our hearts, God's mercy in forgiveness for the sake of Christ. God is the Merciful One. In the words of Lamentations chapter three, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness." He is the Merciful One. In infinite kindness He gave Jesus to bear our sins by offering His life into death on the cross. In His mercy we are forgiven. In His forgiveness we show mercy.

Our heavenly Father is full of mercy. He abounds in love and compassion for all people; especially for those who come to Him with their sins in their sinfulness. This is not a good time in our country, or in our churches. We are all worn down and tired. We have all thought and said, unkind things about our leaders, whom God commands us to honour as His representatives in the civil realm, about other people, whom God calls us respect as fellow humans, created in His image and about one another; whom He has redeemed in the blood of Christ, washed in the waters of baptism and whom we are to love as sisters and brothers. If ever there was a time to turn to the Lord for mercy, this is the time.

God is merciful. He is the Merciful One! His mercies never cease. He removes our sins as far as the east is from the west. His mercies flow freely from the fountain of our baptism. We receive mercy in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Healing in our country, in our churches, in our families and among ourselves, comes through receiving the mercy of forgiveness for the sake of Christ our Saviour. In His mercy let us begin to rebuild what has been destroyed. By His mercy let us begin to reconcile in our nation, in our churches and among ourselves. May Jesus bless us with His Spirit of mercy that we may be merciful to others and to each other, as our heavenly Father is merciful to us for His sake. In His Name Amen.