

Sunday September 11, 2022

What is Mercy?

By Intern Pastor Jory Mickelson

Good morning, GOOD MORNING! It is so good to be back among you, I've missed you. I've been thinking about you all, and I have been praying for you. Praying that God has been caring for you well and that you have been caring for one another.

I had a good vacation. Now I am with you only a little while, as someone once said. Then I am away attending intensive classes for fall term at Luther Seminary. People come and go so quickly here; you might be thinking. I think that about myself as well right now. Please continue to pray for me as well.

Have you ever noticed how parents talk about their children? If the child displays some good quality like an A on a test, or if someone comments on how patient or well-behaved a child is, a parent is likely to take the credit. "Well," the mother says, "my daughter gets that from my side of the family." But, if a child is a hellion, the story quickly changes!

When a child has been up to no good, maybe for most of the day, a parent will say to the one just walking through the door, "Do you know what YOUR child has been up to?" Or that same mother, if her child has a meltdown in the grocery store, turns to the other parent and says, "Clearly they get this from your side of the family!" No one wants to take responsibility. No one wants to take the blame. Our children are small representations of us in some ways.

It is not different for pets, is it? I don't have a child, but when my cat has proceeded to vomit in my shoes, on the carpet, and halfway down the hall I am the first one to shout to my husband, "Come get YOUR CAT, before I murder him!"

So too in Exodus today. Moses goes up the mountain to have a conversation with the Holy One and meanwhile, the Israelites decide to have a big party, with lots of idolatry, drinking, and maybe even a little nudity. And what does God say to Moses? Moses, YOUR PEOPLE have acted perversely! and like any long-married couple, what does Moses say right back to God? Moses says, "These are YOUR people, who YOU brought out of the land of Egypt." Instead of focusing on God's wrath, Moses intercedes for the people, reminding the Holy One of their promises, the covenant they made with the Israelites. Moses says in verse 13, "Remember...your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" and what happens? God changes their mind, remembers their promises. Turns from wrath and shows mercy instead. Moses interceded for the Israelites. Moses reminded the Holy One of their Mercy.

But what exactly is mercy and where does it come from? Well, I was an English major, so I usually turn to the dictionary to get me started. Mercy, a noun, means compassion or forgiveness toward someone we have the power to punish or harm. God could punish or harm the Israelites, and chose compassion or forgiveness instead, even if it took some arguing on Moses' part.

If we look back to the roots of the word mercy, we see that it comes the Latin word *mercedem*, which is “reward, wages, or pay.” By the 6th century, it was used by religious people to mean a heavenly reward earned by those who show kindness to the helpless—those who cannot pay us back for our good deeds. Now, this might begin to sound familiar to us Lutherans from what we know about the medieval church at the time of Martin Luther...doing good works for a heavenly reward.

This was Martin Luther’s main anxiety when he was an Augustinian monk. He knew he was a sinner. Luther confessed his sins, scrupulously, endlessly, obsessively. Luther wanted to know how could he ever know if his sins were forgiven? How could he ever know if he had done enough good to erase the bad, and know he would make it into heaven? Martin Luther did not know a merciful God, only a God of judgement and condemnation.

Perhaps some of you grew up with a God like this, one who judges, one who condemns, one who keeps a list of every wrong thing you have ever done, not only that but every wrong thing you have ever thought! As you know, if you have had this kind of God, there is no mercy. There is no comfort. We live our lives in continual fear and anxiety. We do everything we can to be good, to be better, and it never seems like enough. We are exhausted and frightened and often feel alone. And then we worry that God is judging us for feeling alone too.

Let me assure you, you are not alone. If you have ever felt this way, you are not the only one. Many of us have felt this way. Some of us still might. Luther certainly did. But you know what? He encountered a merciful God. A loving God. A compassionate God who has come not to condemn, but to save. And if you haven’t experienced a God like this, or haven’t experienced a God like this in a long time, let me assure you, no, let me promise you that you can. I promise you; you too can know the compassionate, loving God that Luther knew, and that this God is already here among us at Christ Lutheran Church.

But before I get too carried away on streams of love and mercy, let me be clear that just because God loves and forgives and saves, that doesn’t mean all my sins, failings, and faults go away forever. Sure, my assurance of salvation, of going to heaven in plain speech is a one and done thanks to Jesus. Some fancier people than me will call it Justification by faith or maybe you were forced in your catechism classes to memorize the phrase, “Justification by grace through faith.” But I think that kind of language clouds what we are getting at here. I think the great minds and explainers of Christianity sometimes get so busy explaining that we have a hard time making sense of it. Yes, we are saved by grace through faith. Because of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf, we can be assured by our baptism that we have been saved, that we have salvation, that we are going to heaven. Good. Got it. That is the one and done part.

But the part that is ongoing, is that even though God has forgiven me my sins. Even though I have a merciful, forgiving, compassionate, loving God, I am still a sinner. I am still a flawed human being. I still have character defects. Sometimes it feels like I am a little sin factory, and they just keep tumbling down the conveyor belt like that seen with Lucile Ball in I Love Lucy where she gets the job at the chocolate factory. So many chocolates shooting at us! So many sins!

So, I am saved, but I keep sinning. I am justified, but sometimes I am still a jerk! Just like Paul confesses in 1 Timothy today, that he “was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.” Paul was a big sinner, yet God could use him for the Holy One’s saving work. Paul goes on to say in 1 Timothy 1:14 that the grace of our Lord overflowed for him, because of the immeasurable faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Let me say this again, that the grace of our Lord overflows for us, for you and me, because of the immeasurable faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. This is because, and this is verse 15, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Not to condemn us, but to save us. Not to send us straight down the greased slide to hell, but to love us completely, to love us all the way into heaven.

So, what is mercy? Well, mercy is the love Christ has for each and every one of us. Mercy is the love that God has for you right here, right now. We can’t earn it. We can’t do anything to deserve it because it is a gift with no strings attached. God is showing us, we humans full of failures and brokenness, God’s immeasurable kindness with no strings attached and without any expectation of us being able to pay it back. What good news for us today.

But this might be hard news for us as well. We may not often experience this kind of love, or maybe never have. Where we have been loved without any expectation or strings attached. Where we have been fully embraced and not felt like we had to return the gesture because it was expected, or polite, or we would feel guilty if we did not. I sometimes think this is why we struggle so much with God’s mercy. We all understand God’s wrath and judgement and condemnation, because for us humans do wrath and judgement, and condemnation pretty well. But love? Not so much.

We know we sin. We know our faults and failings, even if we don’t like to acknowledge them. We put our best Sunday faces for an hour or two and smile and say hello to everyone, but then we have to drive home in traffic afterward, often with other sinners on the road ahead and behind us. Maybe even another sinner in the car telling us how to drive! This is why we have the confession and forgiveness at the beginning of every service where we say, “we confess that sin still has a hold on us” and ask God like the psalmist does today in Psalm 51, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” Sin still has a hold on me, but God please renew my spirit.

Luther assures us that, “Christ is no Moses, no exactor, no giver of laws, but a giver of grace, a Savior; he is infinite mercy and goodness, freely and bountifully given to us.” So, with this assurance we know that every time we ask the Merciful One to forgive us our sins, it is given. This is what Paul was talking about when he says there was immeasurable faith and love in Christ. Through Christ we are made new creations. We can begin again.

This is Good News for you and me, but still, what is mercy? What does it actually look like in the world? Again, Martin Luther tells us: “What is it to serve God and to do His will? Nothing else than to show mercy to our neighbor. For it is our own neighbor who needs our service; God in heaven needs it not.”

God’s mercy in the world comes through our own hands. God’s love for all of creation begins in us and flows outward to all that we touch. That we give and do not count the cost. That we love

without expecting anything in return. The medieval church of Martin Luther's time had seven direct ways to show mercy to others drawn from scripture, mostly from the Gospel of Matthew. They were to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to shelter the homeless, to comfort the sick, to visit those in prison and to bury the dead. We as Lutherans might call this caring for our neighbor. And we do many of these at Christ Lutheran Church through our volunteering at the Other Bank and community Food Bank donations, by making quilts for people all over the world, by being a back-up emergency shelter for the community, and also for our One Parish One Prisoner ministry. And in so many other ways that I can't possibly list them all this morning. This is what mercy looks like. This is God's love poured out upon the earth. This is God's Kin-dom.

The speakers in Jesus' parables today did not say weep. They did not say worry about all your sins. They did not say live in fear. No, the people in the parables today say, "Rejoice with me." The shepherd returning with the sheep says, "Rejoice with me." The woman who has found the lost coin gathers her neighbors saying, "Rejoice with me." And us too. We have encountered our Merciful God. Our Compassionate Savior. Our Loving Friend and we share that mercy, compassion, and love with others. We go out rejoicing into the world, proclaiming the Good News that even though we are sinners we have been saved and that not even the least of us, not you, not me, have been left behind in the love of God. You and I in this very moment, right now are held in God's embrace, held closer and tighter than we might ever know. This is the good news that have heard and bring to you this morning.