

JUST MERCY: LIVING BY GRACE
A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Genesis 45:3-11
Luke 6:27-38

February 17, 2019

As we look more closely at today's passage from the Gospel of Luke, I can't help but think that many of us look at and respond to Jesus' teaching in this passage the same way most children look at and respond to cooked spinach on their dinner plate. For no matter how good it is for us, and no matter how much Jesus emphasizes its high nutritional value through the example of his own life, no one around the table really wants to dig in. As a preacher, I know this passage goes down hard no matter when or how it is served. So even though we gather here for worship every Sunday as those anticipating an encounter with Jesus and eager to hear what Jesus would say to us, today we are likely finding it difficult to swallow what Jesus is serving up.

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." (Luke 6:27-28) This is not at all what we wanted to hear when we came today – we want to hear something more affirming, something that allows us to feel really good about ourselves. I come before you today admitting that this teaching is really hard to take to heart, because what Jesus is asking his disciples to do is nothing less than swim against the flow of society, go against conventions, stand out in a crowd.

At first glance, this entrée of love and grace that Jesus is offering us looks delicious, and so we excitedly dig in and fill ourselves up. But when it becomes clear that we are to share this entrée with others, it no longer looks and tastes as good. In fact, the whole thing seems unrealistic and more like a recipe for disaster. And why shouldn't it? This love of God that we have seen and experienced most fully through the life and death of Jesus goes against our human thinking, our desires, and our will. The very idea of doing what is best for the other person no matter who that other person is and no matter how that other person has treated us runs contrary to our natural inclinations as human beings.

Clearly, Jesus would have had an easier time of it if he had left this item about "loving, doing good, blessing and praying" for enemies off the menu of his message, and I'm confident in saying that followers of Jesus over the centuries, including us today, would have a much easier time stomaching Jesus message without texts like this one. If Jesus had chosen instead to preach messages like "Three Easy Steps to Love" and "Five Paths to a Better Life," I think things would have gone so much better for him and living a life of faith would be so much easier for us. Of course, the cross that so poignantly represents the extent of God's love and the cost of our redemption would probably not be the primary symbol of our Christian faith. And yet, despite the painful cost, Jesus' refused to focus on anything else but the real issue – the type of nutrition needed to sustain health. For whether we like it or not there is a vast difference between what we want and what we need.

Here in Luke's gospel, Jesus presents to us what is a radical and new interpretation of the "Golden Rule." The Golden Rule says, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." That rule in and of itself was not actually unique. The rule is found in Old Testament teachings and contained within the sacred law of hospitality. The Golden rule was taught by Philo and Homer and other great philosophers throughout the centuries. But Jesus goes further than the Golden Rule. Jesus tells us that our attitude, our response toward others has nothing to do with who that other

person is or how that person treats us. We are to love our enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, because that is when we are most like God – a God who is kind to the ungrateful and to the wicked. (Luke 6:35) How the other person treats us is not even a part of this equation, because it is all about being merciful, just as our Heavenly Father is merciful. (Luke 6:36) You see, whereas our natural inclination is to “do to others as they do to us,” Jesus emphasizes that we are to do to others as he did for us, as God continues to do for us. This means showing mercy and doing good to those who offer us nothing, or even worse, have done something bad to us or others.

According to Jesus, strangers and yes, even enemies have equal footing with friends and family when it comes to how we are to treat them. We are to turn our cheek, give our coat, hand over our shirt to basically anyone and everyone (vs. 29). Why? because those we consider enemies and those we consider friends are equally loved by God – a God who is kind and merciful to all His children. Those we may consider bad and wrong are not only to be forgiven, but, like friends and family, are to be loved, blessed and prayed for. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same... But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.” (Luke 6:32,33, 35). Wow, are you feeling a little sick to your stomach? It’s enough to make the most faithful among us queasy.

How do we do good to those who do bad to us when that’s not at all what we want to do, and it’s certainly not what our society as a whole tells us to do? How can we live lives of loving kindness when our words and actions tend to answer hurt with more hurt? It comes down to acknowledging the uncomfortable truth that we ourselves are numbered among the ungrateful and wicked. We are all in need of grace; thankfully, God is merciful!

Even in the Old Testament where it sometimes seems as though God’s judgment is more prevalent than God’s grace, we are confronted by powerful stories of grace. Our lesson from the book of Genesis gives us a strong taste of God’s mercy and how that mercy is meant to be lived out through us. In chapter 45 we find Joseph face to face with his brothers who were suffering in the midst of a horrible drought and who had come to Egypt to plead for help. Just a few years earlier those same brothers had plotted Joseph’s death, but chose instead to commit the slightly lesser offense of selling him into slavery. Considering all of that past history, we would likely say that Joseph has every right to shun them, send them away without help, and to even punish them. But instead Joseph feeds them, talks to them, and tells them his story – a story that included both great struggle and God’s gracious care. Clearly, Joseph’s life had been far from ideal, and yet he was able to see how God was at work bringing good out of difficulty and pain.

Sometimes, we are the ones who feel wronged, whether that wrong has been done to us directly or indirectly. But in the midst of those experiences and the feelings that follow, we are encouraged to see God, not with the conclusion that God has caused or even allowed those hurtful and sometimes devastating circumstances, but, with faith in a God who can nonetheless bring some measure of good out of the darkest valleys of our lives. Sometimes, even at the lowest points of our lives, we are given the opportunity to be “Joseph,” repaying evil with good and testifying to the sustaining power and presence of God. To be merciful as God is merciful is to allow this testimony to hold more power over us than anger and the desire for retribution.

This difficult admonition from Jesus to love even our enemies is not simply a call to grit our teeth and make a resolution to be nicer even to those who are not nice to us. Rather, this is a call to live in a way contrary to our human nature, a way that is possible only as we “live out” of a new power born from above. To answer hurt with mercy is possible only when Christ is our strength.

Jesus knows full well that we will never love our enemies unless we ourselves have experienced amazing grace – unless we have known something of God’s power to transform and make us different than we tend to be. God’s grace alone allows us to move beyond our natural inclinations and to love with a grace that is greater than our sin, than our best intentions, than our hard work. This grace is at the heart of God and truly is the “good news” of the gospel, but it’s not easy news for those of us who are called to follow. It means our words and actions must become disciplined by God’s grace. The more we are able to live by such grace, the more we will be able to see that such practices are actually acts of resistance to evil, acts that have the power to transform others and the world through us.

Scripturally, we witness the power of this resistance in Joseph the son of Jacob, and in Jesus the Christ. But we have also seen it in more contemporary individuals such as Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Theresa and Nelson Mandela. With these examples and countless others, Jesus points his followers toward a narrow and difficult path that is lit only by the light of grace. Yes, this grace is often viewed as weakness in our world, but we know differently. We know that it is precisely because “God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Psalm 103:8) that there is hope for each one of us and for the world.

When we started this “Just Mercy” sermon series a couple of Sundays ago, Pastor Nick shared with you a video clip, and I’d like to do the same. I invite you to listen to Bryan Stevenson, the author of the book [Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption](#)....(video)

It’s a powerful, transformational thing to believe and live as though, “Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve done.” Certainly, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus attests to this worst understanding of humanity as well as the value that every human being has in the eyes of God. We are called to see other people as God sees them, so that the work of God’s healing and reconciliation can continue through us to the world. If we want to make a difference in the world, if we want to see real change, we must be willing to do things that make us uncomfortable, things like loving not only family and friends, but also strangers and even enemies. If we are going to be kind and merciful as God is kind and merciful we must be willing to let go of anger and resentment. In fact, we must put aside a whole range of judgements and condemnations if we are going to see the person who is homeless, who is using a SNAP card, who is living in generational poverty, who is incarcerated as a beloved child of God.

Our passage from Luke speaks boldly and uncomfortably to us today; it dares to call our character into question if we’re only willing to extend kindness and mercy to those who look like us, who live the way we expect, who believe the way we believe, who seem like a “good investment” because of what we receive in return. Living by grace is not for the faint of heart, and yet it is how disciples make a difference for Christ in this world. Amen.