

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The primary text for our meditation today is the Gospel according to Luke,

“You all become merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”¹

As the theme of God’s mercy and stewardship was apparent in the readings for the third Sunday after Trinity – notably from the prophet Micah,

“Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of His inheritance.”²

So today, likewise, God’s Word’s theme of mercy and forgiveness is continued. These themes are present in the familiar and popularly quoted text of Luke Chapter Six. There Jesus directs His disciples away from the dangers of hypocrisy, teaches them the mercy of the Father and leads them in the practice and self-giving life He Himself emulates as the Teacher. This, our Lord does through the introductory divine imperatives [be merciful, judge not, condemn not, forgive, and give] and the explanatory parable which follows.

Now since “judge not” is such a popular “proof text” in the American religious and non-religious landscape, it’s important to first point out two of the major false readings of this text.

First, as many of you are probably familiar with, so often this text is reduced in practice to what, in theological terms, is called “antinomianism” or “against the law.” “Jesus says judge not, so that means you can’t tell me when I’ve sinned... Hey, you really shouldn’t do that, that’s against the sixth commandment – Don’t judge me!”

Or as renowned moralist Miley Cyrus would say, “Only God can judge ya, forget the haters.” Basically, this teaching is found when a Christian says, “I can live any life I want, with full recklessness and abandonment for the Holy Law of God, because, Jesus says, Judge not.” This reading ultimately translates as “judgment doesn’t apply to me,

¹ Luke 6: 36

² Micah 7:18

sin doesn't exist, and therefore the law doesn't exist" – AKA, Antinomianism, "against the law."

The second false reading is one that confuses the order of justification with sanctification – or confuses the order of being declared righteous by God with the new life that follows. Some say, "When Jesus says forgive and you will be forgiven, what he really means is, after you forgive other people and do good to them, God will then reward you by forgiving your sins, too." As if we were capable of such mercy in the first place. This interpretation is thus essentially works righteousness. Our Lutheran Fathers respond by stating in this extended quote,

"Christ preaches repentance when he says, 'Forgive,' and he adds the promise, 'and you will be forgiven.' He does not say that when we forgive we merit the forgiveness of sins by the outward act. But he requires a new life, which certainly is necessary. At the same time [though] he means that forgiveness of sins is received through faith..."³

Forgiveness is not earned by us, it is given as a free gift and received through faith. So the legalistic interpretation is found to be just as wrong as its brother Antinomianism.

Rather, in the correct reading, the imperatives, judge not, condemn not, be merciful, forgive and give, are contingent upon, and made possible by, the gift of God. The mercy that Jesus speaks of when he says, "you all become merciful," is not that of one's own accord. It is not mercy brought about through our efforts and doing. It is not mercy that does away with or villainizes the law of God. It is not mercy defined by our own characteristics and practiced through our own whims and wishes. It is mercy welling up in forgiven sinners because of the Father's mercy toward them. It is mercy which mirrors God when he judges us not, condemns us not, forgives us, and gives to us. It is mercy received and shared. After being justified or declared right with God, after receiving the mercy of God poured into us on account of Christ's death and resurrection delivered through the means of grace, then we show mercy to our

³ Apology, V. "Love and Fulfilling the Law."

neighbor. Again, mercy is a gift first received and then shared. Our mercy follows God's mercy.

So, the improper judgment that Jesus commands us to not partake in is that judgment which leads others to believe that the Father is not truly merciful. It is judgment in practice which is reduced to legalism or abandoned altogether through antinomianism. Judgment taught through word and deed that ignores free mercy. Mercy shown to us by God the Father, who freely forgives for Christ sake. And so, too we who are from time to time practitioners of such judgment, Christ says,

*Become merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*⁴

To explain this imperative further, Jesus tells a parable: "A blind man is not able to lead a blind man." Throughout Luke's Gospel, Christ refers to false teachers in particular as "the blind," the prime example being the Pharisees. The Pharisees are called blind ones because of their hypocrisy. For those of you who don't know, the word hypocrisy is a compound of the Greek preposition "under" and the noun "judgment." It is a term predominantly used in Greek theater which refers to the actor's task of performing, or judging, while wearing, or being under, a mask. You see, in Greek drama there were only a couple actors per play and each actor would wear different masks for different characters. Hence, judging under or hypocrisy.

Thus, hypocrites are two-faced people who, though they are in reality one way, they act as if they are another. In other words, the mask of the Pharisees is the teaching that one is capable of pleasing God through one's own actions. It is the teaching that we are not poor miserable sinners... Such a life lived by this teaching is hypocritical because it is an act. It is an act because sinners are like blind men hidden under a mask, a mask with no eye holes. Without the mercy of the Father they can neither guide themselves or one another in the way of mercy. Without the mercy of God they can do nothing. To put it personally, you can act like you know where you're going all you

⁴ Luke 6:36

want, but when you're blind, it's dark out, you're unfamiliar with the terrain around here, and a guide, you better believe you're eventually going to walk right into a cactus.

So, here in Luke Six Jesus speaks in warning both to the disciples and to us. He speaks in warning because of our sinful condition, which, leaves us as blind men. That is, apart from Christ and his mercy, we are all like someone blinded by a beam in our eye trying to take a speck out of our brother's eye. The one with the beam in the eye is the sinner, who doesn't know he's a sinner, trying to show other sinners how not to sin.

Jesus warns his disciples because this blindness ultimately makes sinners unable to lead in the way of mercy. The parable of the blind leading the blind points out that when poor teachers falsely teach their students through word and deed, they both end up in a pit – in the pit of hell. Consider these common lines of false teaching: "I'm just doing what they did to me. Do unto others before they do unto you. I know they forgive me, but I can't forgive myself. You know, he's going to have to show me a lot more effort if he thinks we'll be even anytime soon. Or, I forgive her now, but if she ever does it again that'll be the last time."

To such thinking Jesus says,

*"With the measure you measure it will be measured to you."*⁵

And the apostle Paul teaches the same when he says,

*"Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge practice the very same thing."*⁶

When teachers of the Word, that is, pastors, parents and all Christians, act toward their neighbor as if forgiveness only comes when you earn it, they lead themselves and their neighbor away from the Mercy of God and into the pit. They catechize one another into hell.

In our Old Testament reading Joseph's brothers, after trying to lie their way out, fall on the ground before their brother saying,

⁵ Luke 6: 38c

⁶ Romans 2: 1

“Behold, we are to you for servants.”⁷

They do so in a feeble attempt to merit forgiveness for their former wrongdoing against their brother. Their response to selling Joseph into slavery is to now offer themselves into slavery. They knew the true measure of their wrongdoing – it meant a bad measure was likely headed their way. Yet, Joseph’s brothers led one another to think that the way out of the mess of sin is to go to work. This is a line of thinking we know all too well. “If I first amend my ways and pay God back for my sin, then I know He’ll forgive me... God will be happy that I’m trying to get better at it.”

But the disciple is not above the teacher... and so, Joseph responds,

“Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?”⁸

Since the Teacher gives freely, the disciple receives freely. The answer to your sin is not to fall at the feet of God declaring yourself a slave to his will, give your heart to Jesus, and then earn his mercy. Nor is the answer to your brother’s sin against you to demand that he do likewise.

Unrepentant judging, condemning, withholding forgiveness, and withholding gifts – that is, ultimately the unrepentant withholding of mercy, makes us blind to the mercy of God. And through the blindness of hypocrisy and impenitence, we Christians then will teach our neighbor wrongly about God. And the blind will lead the blind into the pit. And so, Jesus says,

“Become merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”⁹

That the mercy and forgiveness of God is the source and foundation for our mercy and forgiveness to others is evident by Christ’s words,

“Everyone who is fully trained will be as his Teacher.”¹⁰

The Teacher is Christ Himself. His teaching of Law and Gospel is the cure to spiritual blindness. Through the Ten Commandments, Christ shows us our sin, shows us the beam in our eye which has made us blind; and through His healing Gospel,

⁷ Genesis 50: 18b

⁸ Genesis 50:19

⁹ Luke 6: 36

¹⁰ Luke 6: 40

Christ removes that beam with abundant forgiveness. He is merciful, just as the Father is merciful.

Yet the mercy of God doesn't always appear to be for our good, does it? In our Genesis text, God showed mercy and goodness through the intended evil of Joseph's brothers. Through their act of hatred by selling their brother into slavery God saved the lives of thousands of people, including Joseph's brothers. No doubt when Joseph was being carted off to Egypt, away from father and mother, away from house and home, no doubt it was then difficult to see the merciful hand of God at work.

So, it is today that such hardships and trials don't always appear to be for our good. Loss of job, loss of home, failing health, family disputes... death. Such hardships leave us, as Paul says in our Epistle reading,

*"...groaning awaiting divine adoption, the redemption of our bodies."*¹¹

Such hardships leave us wondering where God is in all of this. Why he won't come even now to rescue and deliver?

To this groaning, Jesus consoles you: Your Father is merciful. Though we often work evil under the mask of our hypocrisy and sin, it seems to us that God also works under masks. And despite our blindness, He is at work even now, in all matters – He is at work leading you as a merciful and caring shepherd leads His flock to green pastures – to life everlasting with Him. We know this because the mercy and true character of the Father was made apparent when He gave up His only begotten Son into death that you might not die eternally. What had the mask of the worst evil was for the greatest good. There on the place of the skull, called Golgotha, Christ Jesus received the sinner's full measure. Your measure. There at Calvary, He was judged and condemned, beaten, bruised, blooded and killed. There, He was nailed to the beams of the cross. Yet, there, Christ Jesus looked in mercy on the world, judged not, condemned not, forgave and gave. On the cross, Christ gave in full measure, pouring out His very life

¹¹ Romans 8:23b

for the sake of blind sinners like you. On the beam of the cross He took away even the tiniest speck of sin from your eyes.

And so, through his death, we blind ones receive the full measure of the Teacher's giving,

"A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, overflowing into the fold of your pocket."¹²

This very day the Lord Himself offers His people this abundant measure in the Divine Service. Here, He gives you the good measure of forgiveness in Holy Absolution. Here, He gives you the good measure of pure teaching in His spoken, sung and chanted Word. And here, He gives you a good measure of Grace at His Table... overflowing your lap with heavenly food, His true body and blood given and shed for you for the forgiveness of all of your sins. Here, in the House of the Lord, our Teacher, Jesus Christ, in mercy, removes the beam of sin from your eye, curing your spiritual blindness. Here, He leads you not into the pit of death and hell, but on the paths of righteousness which lead to eternal life. And here, the Teacher shows the way of self-giving mercy. It is not the blind leading the blind. It is the Great Teacher putting into you exactly that which He wills to bring out of you. It is the Great teacher teaching you to be like His Father.

Become merciful, just as your Father is merciful.¹³

Receiving the overflowing measure of God's mercy and forgiveness we respond, as our Post-Communion collect says, "in faith toward Him and fervent love toward one another." What is more, we also daily pray that the Lord continue to "forgive us our trespasses as we also forgive those who trespass against us." We freely forgive children for their disobedience. We are freed to forgive enemies for their hatred. We may truly forgive adulterers for their lust, thieves for their theft, slanderers for their gossip, and coveters for their envy. We are given the sight and freedom to forgive all. In Christ, you

¹² Luke 6: 38b

¹³ Luke 6: 36

measure with the measure that God has measured to you. The measure of free forgiveness.

And so Jesus ends the text today with a final directive:

“Cast out the beam out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to cast out the speck in the eye of your brother.”¹⁴

As Christ, in the mercy of His Father, puts mercy into you, removing the blinding beam of sin from your eye through daily contrition and repentance, giving you a heaping measure of mercy in His Divine Service, so you put mercy into your neighbor. Through word and deed, you find yourselves teaching one another the mercy of the Triune God. You discover yourselves leading your neighbor here to the House of the Lord where such mercy overflows in abundance. The gift received is the gift shared. As God has done it for you so now you judge not, condemn not, forgive and give ... becoming merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Genesis 50:15-21

Romans 8:18-23

Luke 6:36-42

The fourth Sunday after Trinity

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¹⁴ Luke 6: 42b