

Lectionary 7 C 2022

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

February 20, 2022

Luke 6:27-38; Genesis 45:3-11, 15

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Last week, I introduced you to the Sermon on the Plain, Luke's version of the better-known Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew's gospel. In the better-known Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes this statement: "*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" [Matt. 5:48] While in this morning's Sermon on the Plain, Jesus says, "*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*" Perhaps Jesus really gave two sermons, and perhaps he uttered both of these instructions on separate occasions, one version on the mountain, one version on the plain. Or perhaps Jesus originally spoke one of these sayings, in one gospel, and it was altered, either accidentally or deliberately, in the other gospel. No one under heaven will ever know for sure. Although hundreds, if not thousands, of articles and books and theories have tried to explain the differences.

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." [OR] *"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."* In either case, Jesus is asserting a characteristic of God the Father, and instructing us to be more like God the Father. In either case, it is a tall order: *Be like God*. In the Garden of Eden, the serpent promised Eve and Adam that if they ate the forbidden fruit, they would be like God. [Genesis 3:5] Whatever the serpent and Eve and Adam were thinking, they probably were not tempted by the very high standard that Jesus sets in the Sermon on the Mount and in the Sermon on the Plain. Adam and Eve might have wanted something like power and control and wealth. But when Jesus summons us to be like God, in today's gospel, we already have some sense of what he means, and it is not a tempting piece of fruit. *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.* That is a tall order, a long list of very difficult things. Surely that is not what Adam and Eve were hoping for when the serpent promised them that they could be like God.

Jesus follows that long, difficult list with something commonly called the golden rule. "Do to others as you would have them do to you." [Luke 6:31] That sounds doable. That's a foundation of human ethics, that people of many religions can subscribe to. Or even atheists. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant famously made this his "categorical imperative," which goes like this: *Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law.* Just about everyone thinks this is exactly what Jesus said, only Jesus said it so

much more simply: *Do to others as you would have them do to you.* But in the context of the Sermon on the Plain, this is not just a teaching to be fair and equitable in your dealings with others. Because what we want from others is so much more than fairness. We need more than fairness, we seek more than justice for ourselves. What we need, what we seek, is forgiveness. What we need, what we seek, is mercy.

Today, this extraordinary section of the New Testament has been paired for us with the extraordinary conclusion of the book of Genesis. Joseph, the son of Jacob, had been sold into slavery by his brothers. Actually, they planned to murder him, but one of them, Reuben, said that they should not kill him, but rather sell him as a slave. It is a cesspool of petty grievances and violence, and Reuben stands out as his brother's protector. I wish the sandwich had been named for him, because he deserves some credit. Anyway, out of this murderous scheme, Joseph was sold into slavery in a foreign land. And in today's first reading, his brothers have come crawling back to him for help, because he became powerful and rich. So they come to him, only they don't know that it's him. But they need him to save them, essentially, from starvation. And he would be justified in murdering all of them, or turning them into slaves. Except maybe Reuben and Benjamin. Justice and fairness would justify revenge. That would be fitting. But Joseph decides not to avenge himself. And in fact, he is exceedingly generous to them, and to all of the extended relatives. He has a black-and-white choice. Revenge, which would be justified. Or mercy, which is not required. But he shows mercy. He forgives. He is the bigger man. And today's first reading is kind of the climax of the story, when he reveals his true identity, and when they find out, they would expect revenge, but Joseph is all mercy, and all grace. As his Father in heaven is all mercy and all grace. So it's one of the best moments of one of the best parts of the Bible. So good that Andrew Lloyd Webber created a musical, "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," and the only other person Andrew Lloyd Webber ever did that for was Jesus himself. (And of course, Eva Peron.)

In Lutheranism, the Christian tradition in which I stand and make my witness, God touches us with his mercy through Jesus— a mercy that we normally call "grace"— and his mercy sets me free from my selfishness and my sense of just desserts, sets me free to objectively focus upon, and serve, and do good by my neighbor. In John's first letter, he writes, "We love because he first loved us." That's very Lutheran. In another part of Luke's gospel, Jesus says that whoever is forgiven much, loves much. But whoever is forgiven little, loves little. In Lutheranism, we are enthusiastic about that. It's big forgiveness that we get from God. And so it's big love that we have for our neighbor and for creation. In Lutheranism, and in much of Christianity, God's grace comes to us through Jesus, through Word and Sacrament, and then we pay that love forward by serving our neighbors. It's pretty simple. Not easy. Hardly easy! But simple.

In the Sermon on the Plain, it's expressed differently than in Lutheran doctrine. But it's essentially the same thing. The life of God— the kingdom of God— is mercy. You participate in the life of God, you participate in the kingdom of God, by participating in that kind of mercy. Again, very simple. But very difficult to do. But not a complicated concept. *"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."*

Finally, almost as an appendix to this message, I want to say something about loving one's enemies. When people hear the word enemy, they probably think of Vladimir Putin, getting ready to invade Ukraine. Who are my enemies? Cuba? North Korea? Iran? China? The United States of America has enemies. The Sermon on the Plain is not about me, Steve, forgiving Vladimir Putin. It's not about me, Steve, having mercy on Kim Jong Un. For what it's worth, I doubt that Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un are terribly concerned about how love and tenderness Steve Springer has in his heart for them. Otto Von Bismarck, a 19th statesman in Germany, famously said that you cannot govern with the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is not government policy. It wasn't written for nation states to use in their conduct of foreign policy. Christians can talk about public policy and foreign policy, and we should. And we can discuss just wars, and unjust wars, and pacifism. And maybe good Christian discipleship might compel us to support some government activities and choices, and to oppose other government activities and choices. I think that I can make a good case that the Marshall Plan, which was merciful, was a better outcome for Europeans than was the Treaty of Versailles, which was fully justified, but it was punitive and ultimately led to even worse bloodshed and tragedy. But I can't say whether the Marshall Plan was chosen on Christian principle, or on plain common sense.

But the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain are not about how my heart should be oriented toward some foreign country or some dictator in Venezuela. And by the way, focusing on national policy and foreign policy? That's letting me off too easy. And it's letting you off too easy. The Joseph story is about a dysfunctional family. Sibling rivalry. Family secrets and lies. Abuse. And how the cycle of abuse and lies perpetuates from one generation to another. The story is good because it brings home the cost of mercy. And the costs associated with no mercy. Family, friends, neighbors. Co-workers, sorority sisters, grandchildren. This is where the work is for most of us. In fact, I think it's demonstrable that most people may have a rigid and harmful opinion of homosexual people until they meet one, or discover one in their own family. I think people have ideas about race until they talk about race with a neighbor. Sitting in front of the TV for three or four hours a day and screaming at what you see happening in the world is pretty much useless. Or possibly actually bad for you and for God's world. [But] Talking with loved ones, understanding them, getting the other side of the story— whether it's addiction, race relations, student loans, undocumented workers, parenting, schools, grief, anger, resentment: wading into all of that stuff with others in a spirit of mercy— that's real work!

But it's also the beginning of the life of God, the kingdom of God. It's also proven to work. Don't worry about Vladimir Putin, in terms of today's gospel.

Our liturgy experts chose to accompany these readings with an abridged version of the prayer commonly attributed to Saint Francis. And whether it was written by Saint Francis or some French priest in Paris in 1912, it nevertheless captures the spirit of what Jesus is saying to us today. O Lord Jesus, make us instruments of your peace, that where there is hatred, we may sow love, where there is injury, pardon, and where there is despair, hope. Grant, O divine master, that we may seek to console, to understand, and to love in your name, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

