

Love In A World on Fire: Called to Mercy, Despite Everything

Luke 6:36-42; Gen 50:15-21

Good morning! Happy Fourth of July weekend! This summer we are looking at what love looks like for us, right now. Love in a world on fire. How do we actually live out loving our neighbor in this time of pandemic and protests? Last week we were reminded of the great worth of each and every one of us to God—how the shepherd goes to save the one and leaves the 99. We are also called to treat everyone—especially those who are most at risk and endangered-- as precious. Two weeks ago we heard the call to invite *everyone* into God’s great feast—even those on the margins, out in the highways and hedges. And Pastor Chris reminded us of the people right at our gate who we might be overlooking—people we are called to love and serve, not ignore. But today we get to what may be the heart of loving our neighbor—mercy. We are called to show mercy in spite of everything.

Mercy. It is key to all our relationships. Max Lucado said that relationships don’t thrive because the guilty are punished but because the innocent are merciful. Because the innocent are merciful. It is the mercy of the innocent that frees us from endless cycles of violence, from feuding, from escalating revenge. Mercy is not insisting on your “rights” but choosing to treat someone better than they deserve. Mercy is cutting other people some slack. Showing mercy is a chance to act towards others the same way that God shows grace to us. Showing mercy is a way we can imitate God.

Sometimes people think being merciful is weak, but that is exactly backwards. It requires great strength of will to give up your rights—your chance to get what’s yours. And mercy—unlike fighting or punishment—actually has the power to change people for the good. Martin Luther King’s non-violent protests changed the conversation about race in America 50 years ago—because of mercy. Because innocent people were willing to put themselves in harms’ way. Mercy is what allows our relationships to grow and our society to be civilized. Mercy is the oil that lubricates our interactions with each other. As this time of living in close

quarters with some and being distanced from others continues; our need to show mercy to each other is obvious. At least Alice tells me it is! We all need a little grace.

The great church father Augustine echoed Jesus' teaching when he said that two works of mercy set a person free—forgive and you will be forgiven, and give and you will receive. Mercy sets you free! It is about treating people better than they deserve, it is about forgiving others, and it is about being generous towards others. Mercy allows us to be generous in how we think about others as well as in how we treat them. Shakespeare describes the promise of mercy well—"The quality of mercy is not strained, it drops as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: It blesses him that gives and him that takes."

Our family relationships are our closest relationships. They are often the laboratory where we live out this call to mercy. People in our families see and bear the brunt of both our worst and our best. Let me tell you about what may be the worst, most dysfunctional family ever. Their family business was herding sheep and goats. It was a big, sprawling, complicated family. Lots of kids, several different mothers involved. The center of the family was the dad, let's call him Jake. Jake had grown up in a dysfunctional family of his own—his father did not really like him. Jake was a mama's boy, and he was also a liar and a cheat. He cheated his own brother so badly that he feared for his life and ran away. For 20 years!

Jake finally returned home with his family. But the cycle of disfunction continued with the next generation. Jake had obvious favorites among his kids, especially the next to youngest son, Joe. Jake gave him amazing gifts to make it crystal clear to everyone that Joe was the special one. Is it any surprise that Joe acted like a spoiled brat? Joe even bragged to his older brothers and father about having dreams of them all bowing down to him. Finally, Joe's brothers couldn't take it anymore. One day when they were by themselves, they threw Joe into a pit. Then they sold him as a slave to some passing strangers. Yes—they sold their *own brother* into slavery! To top it off, Jake's sons then told their father that Joe had been killed.

This family makes our own families look pretty tame, doesn't it? As I expect you've realized—this is the family of Jacob or Israel—the beginning of the people of Israel, God's chosen people. First Pres, if God can work with these folks, he can work with us! You know the rest of Joe's story. Years go by, Joseph endures a lot of unfair punishment and maltreatment in

Egypt, including spending years in prison for a crime he did not commit. Despite all of that Joseph grows up to be a surprisingly mature person. Incredibly, he isn't paralyzed by resentment or overwhelmed with self-pity. Instead he serves others well. He is honest, hardworking, smart, and even has the gift of interpreting dreams. By God's grace he ends up as the right-hand man of Pharaoh, the emperor of Egypt. God revealed that a famine was coming to Joseph. Because he listened to the message, the people of Egypt were prepared for it. A few years into the famine Joseph's brothers came to Egypt hoping to buy some food and are reunited with Joseph. Soon the whole family moves to Egypt where there is food and they can live under the protection of Pharaoh.

Our reading today is from 17 years after that. The father, Jacob, has just died. I don't know about your family, but in my experience it's common when parents die for old, long buried conflicts and issues to suddenly surface. Siblings find themselves fighting and angry about slights from childhood. It is a complicated time. Joseph's brothers worried that now that their father was dead Joseph might at last take revenge on them for selling him into slavery. Revenge at last for the years of labor and prison and fear Joseph endured.

The frightened brothers send a message to Joseph, claiming that their father's dying wish was that Joseph would forgive them. Look at Joseph's response. He weeps. Another word for mercy is compassion. Compassion—that means empathy, feeling the other person's pain. Joseph weeps—for his own pain, but also for the wound of guilt and fear his brothers still carried after all these years, and for the continued rift in the family. Joseph feels compassion for his brothers, and he shows them mercy. Mercy is compassion lived out. Mercy is compassion lived out.

Joseph had every right to be mad. He had every right to want to punish them. He had been wronged and he had suffered. Joseph is *entitled*. But mercy is letting go of your rights, letting of your entitlement. Mercy is treating the one who hurt you better than they deserve. Someone said that refusing to forgive is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. When we show mercy we can finally be free of the poison of resentment and unforgiveness.

Joseph shows us the power of forgiveness and he teaches us two great truths that can help you let go of resentment and anger too. The power of forgiveness is illustrated by the fact that we are still reading about his family. Our reading today is a crucial moment—if Joseph had exacted his revenge his family, the people of Israel, would have fallen apart. But because he chose the path of mercy they survived as a family down to this day. Forgiveness has the power to forge relationships. Forgiveness creates a family that lasts.

The first truth Joseph teaches us is about not judging. Anytime we refuse to forgive, anytime we refuse to show mercy, we are judging the other party. Joseph rejects that path. He says “Am I in the place of God?” Judging is God’s business, not ours. When we find ourselves pointing the finger at other people or at other groups, we are putting ourselves in God’s place. That is why Jesus told us “judge not!” He isn’t saying don’t exercise moral discernment—we are called to discern our own actions. No, Jesus is saying don’t put yourself in the place of judging others. That’s not our job. We are in the loving and serving business, not the judging business. When you hear people trying to get you stirred up and angry at some other group, whether it is people of another background or the police or supposed left wing fascists, stop. We are called to love, not to divide and judge. We should be looking at how we can care for those people, not just label them and pretend that they are not people who need mercy too.

The second thing Joseph teaches us is the power of reframing your history. Reframe your past. Look at what he tells his brothers: you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good, for the saving of many lives. Joseph recognizes that evil was done to him. He doesn’t deny it, he doesn’t cover it up, he doesn’t pretend it didn’t happen. But he also doesn’t stop at the evil. Joseph has reframed his story—he doesn’t deny the evil, but doesn’t let it have the last word. Over the decades he has lived a life, raised a family, been able to reunite with his family of origin, and even help to save the lives of thousands of people, protecting them from the famine.

Joseph saw how God used his circumstances to bring about good. Forgiveness is easier when you can reframe what’s happened to include God’s bigger picture. Like Paul wrote to the church in Rome—God works all things together for the good of those who love him. This is a mystery. God is in control, even in the face of our free will, our evil, our rebellion. How that

works is beyond our understanding, but the good news is that God is still in charge. God can use even horrible evil for good. The ultimate example of this is Jesus at the cross. What could be worse than people killing Jesus himself! But *that* is what God used to conquer the power of sin and death. There is no evil so great that God can't redeem it.

Sometimes we can't see—or even imagine—any good coming out of the harm that someone has done to you. Even then, don't let yourself drink the poison of resentment and hatred. Maybe later we will see some benefit, or maybe we never will. But just learning to forgive, simply practicing mercy, makes the world better and makes you happier. Forgiveness is still important.

Our Gospel reading includes Jesus' teaching on mercy. First he tells us: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." We should show mercy because God has shown us mercy. We should pay that gift of grace and undeserved compassion forward to others. Then Jesus explains what mercy looks like. He gives us 2 things to avoid and 2 things to do. This is Jesus' teaching on how to show mercy. First, don't judge and don't condemn. We shouldn't put ourselves in God's place. We are here to love, not to label.

Then Jesus says we should 1) forgive and 2) be generous. Jesus encourages LOTS of forgiveness and lots of giving. Both of these things come back to you. Give and it will be given to you—not skimpily, but generously—poured into your lap, pressed down, shaken together, running over. One of our nephews liked a big breakfast when he was a kid. When he ate cereal he would really FILL the bowl. He'd pour it in, then crush it down, then fill it again and keep on smashing it down until it ran out onto the table. He was maximizing his bowl of cereal! THAT is what God's generosity back to us is like. It is full to overflowing! We are called to live with open hands, ready to share with others.

Jesus also tells us to forgive and we'll be forgiven. As Frederick Buechner said, accepting forgiveness means that we have to admit to ourselves that we did something unspeakable. We have to swallow our pride and accept the truth about what we've done. The pride that keeps us from letting go of our rights and forgiving others is the same pride that keeps us from accepting forgiveness. This is why Jesus teaches us to pray to be forgiven as we forgive. God's

forgiveness isn't conditional, but we need to let go of our pride so we can accept forgiveness, even from God. We have to swallow our pride so we can forgive and to receive forgiveness.

The musical Hamilton is now on TV. If you have not seen it, I really encourage you—this is a great time to give that Disney+ free trial a spin. Hamilton is a remarkable play. All thumbs up! Towards the end of the play Alexander Hamilton has an affair. It ruined his political career, shamed him and damaged his marriage. Then the Hamilton's son was killed in a duel defending his father's honor. Alexander's sin has had terrible consequences. A song called "It's Quiet Uptown" describes the remarkable act of mercy. We see Alexander and his wife Eliza working through their grief, their guilt, their shame. Trying to give and receive forgiveness and mercy. The song calls it the unimaginable. The unimaginable. Eliza's sister sings: "There are moments that words don't reach. There is a grace too powerful to name. We push away what we can never understand. We push away the unimaginable. Forgiveness. Can you imagine? If you see him in the street, walking by her side, talking by her side, have pity. They are going through the unimaginable."

We need some mercy in our lives today. It may seem unimaginable, but we *need* mercy in our society. Not more blaming and pointing and accusing— but rather more giving and caring and forgiving. Jesus calls us to be merciful. That mercy frees us to live and love and to care. Mercy creates space for relationships in spite of our mistakes, despite the horrible things we do to each other. Mercy allows us to grow deeper together, instead of leaving us twisted and stunted by our own fear and hurt and pride. Friends, open your hands. Open your hearts. Live into mercy. We all need some mercy in these strained times. Let's give it freely and bravely and with love.

Let's pray: Father God—thank you for loving us. We are staggered by the mercy you show us, by the ways you accept us back, over and over. Help us to become people of mercy. People of forgiveness and generosity, not of judgment and contempt. Shape us into your people. Whatever our past is, help us to accept your gift of mercy and be merciful to those around us. Especially the ones who hurt us. Help us to be merciful despite everything. In Jesus' name we ask it, Amen.