

The Upside-Down Kingdom: Blessed are the Merciful

Micah 6:6-8

Luke 6:27-42

This morning we're looking at the 5th beatitude, blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

I began this series by saying that Jesus, in delivering the 8 beatitudes, is inviting us to see as God sees. This is the world as God sees it; these are people *Jesus* sees, and wants us to see. People who have been relegated to the margins, or who have been overlooked and ignored, who Jesus is bringing to the center. He is not telling us to do anything; there are no instructions in the beatitudes.

Having said that, with a few of these beatitudes—especially the next three—we can listen to these, and although Jesus is not telling us to do anything, we can hear them and say to ourselves, “I could do that.” Especially because Jesus subsequently tells stories and gives instructions about how these can be lived out: how to be merciful; how to be a peacemaker, etc.

Again, while Jesus isn't telling us to do anything in these beatitudes, there might be some inspiration toward action once we hear them. And I'm going to take that approach in the message this morning. Because our world needs mercy right now. And our world needs God's people, the church, to be merciful people. And, well, **we** all need mercy! Every day. There is a reason the prophet Jeremiah

proclaimed that God's mercies are new every morning. Because we need them every morning!

This morning's beatitude: blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Here is a challenging teaching from Jesus from Luke's gospel. And btw, all of Jesus' teachings about mercy are of a challenging nature. Jesus is pretty salty when it comes to being merciful (more accurately, he is salty when it comes to being *unmerciful*), and his reason for that is because we're talking about something that is at the very heart of who God is, as we'll see.

Before I read from Luke, it's worth noting that this beatitude comes on the heels of "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" because people of that culture/time had vengeance on the brain, and it would be easy for them to assume that "hunger for righteousness" meant "for revenge/vengeance." As I mentioned last week, Jesus did not say "Blessed are those who hunger for revenge." Revenge is not justice, nor is it equitable. It does not make things even, it only escalates violence. So... it seemed important to Jesus to follow "blessed are those who hunger for righteousness" with "blessed are the merciful." As a way of saying, "In case you are thinking of revenge/vengeance as a way of making things right, let me fix that thought for you..."

Luke 6:27-42

27 'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you.

32 'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

37 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.'

39 He also told them a parable: 'Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? ⁴¹Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴²Or how can you say to your neighbor, "Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye", when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

This is the word of the Lord!

Thanks be to God...?

A reading like this can feel like trying to get a drink of water from a fire hose. There is a lot to take in. But I'm going to keep this simple. I simply want to

remind us this morning of the importance of mercy as the heartbeat of Christian faith, and in the life of a person of faith. Because... it is the heartbeat of God.

For example, twice in Matthew's gospel alone Jesus quotes from the prophet Hosea (who speaks on behalf of God, saying): "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." The prophet Micah says the same thing, as we heard, in a very simple but very clear description of what God desires, what God's will is. It isn't more sacrifice, or costly acts of contrition, but simply: "Do justice, love mercy (or be merciful), and walk humbly with God."

So, mercy is at the heart of the gospel. And it is the heart of God, as Jesus indicates in his parables and teaching.

When we talk about mercy, Biblically, we are not talking about general acts of kindness toward others, or giving to charitable causes, or generally being nice people. By all means, do those things! They are important. Biblically speaking, though, mercy goes beyond that. Mercy means extending grace, kindness, and forgiveness to those who we believe don't deserve it. I think that's pretty clear from what we heard Jesus say in our readings this morning. It means extending kindness to those who are in the wrong, or have wronged us somehow. It means pardoning, it means forgiving. It means the releasing of judgments toward others.

This is not easy! It's a tall order. Yet the call of Jesus is to keep working at it, keep making progress, continue to change our habits and our thinking so that, over time, we find it easier to choose mercy, to be merciful as God is merciful. Toward others, and toward ourselves as we try and fail and try again to be merciful people. God is merciful to us as we attempt to be merciful people!

As I looked over Jesus' teaching and all of Jesus' examples of mercy and forgiveness, including the 5th beatitude itself, I noticed they reveal a "what goes around comes around" aspect to life. Did you hear that in the reading? All of this is as close as Jesus gets to the concept of karma—a kind of cause-and-effect aspect to our actions and attitudes: How you treat others is how you'll be treated. The measure you give will be the measure you get. Forgive, you'll be forgiven. Show mercy, you'll get mercy. Don't show mercy, then... Lord, have mercy!

It's not that God likes punishing people who aren't merciful and forgiving, as if God is punitive and mean. Jesus' point is simply that mercy begets mercy; and judgment and criticism beget judgment and criticism. That's just the way it is in God's design of life in the world.

It's like the law of gravity. If I decide to walk off of a second story ledge I'm going to fall and get hurt. That's just what happens because of gravity. God isn't

smiting me if I do that; I've just made a decision to act a certain way that has certain consequences—if I go against the laws of nature. So, God isn't in the business of smiting anyone. In fact, God, in his mercy, is constantly reaching out to anyone who is tempted to walk off that second story ledge, so to speak, and is consistently and lovingly encouraging everyone to heed the law of gravity, so to speak. Or, to put it in gospel terms, to heed the "law" of love.

So in our beatitude and the teachings that we hear from Jesus, he's encouraging us to follow the law of love—of mercy and grace. Be this kind of person, because God wants you to receive the good stuff—mercy and grace in return, and an overflowing measure of blessing that will naturally flow. And, by being merciful, we're extending the invitation to others and giving them the opportunity to experience the mercy of God, and be changed.

But this isn't easy, and it isn't always instinctual for us to follow what Jesus teaches us to do.

So this is a good place to remind us that this is the upside-down/backwards kingdom that Jesus is talking about, and the disciples' first reaction to these beatitudes was very likely to say "No!" If not outwardly, then certainly inwardly. The disciples' actions and reactions we read about in the gospel suggest that inner no—or, not yet. "Blessed are the meek"—I don't think so. "Blessed are the

strong and powerful who get their way,” is probably more along the lines of what they believed, before their minds and hearts were changed. And so forth.

Jesus wants them to hear the beatitudes and get to a point of being able to say “Yes; I see that. I agree with that.” But their—and perhaps our—first reaction to this teaching in particular, is to say, “I don’t think so.” Or, “You don’t understand, Jesus, my situation is different...”

In listening to this string of teachings about mercy, and then the call for self-reflection (clearing the logs from our vision), some of *us* may have reacted with an inner “no” to them. Or with an attempt to explain them away. And if you reacted that way, you’re in good company!

Part of the challenge for Christians, historically, with showing mercy and forgiveness, and generally choosing to be merciful, is that being merciful doesn’t feel moral—and I use the word “feel” here intentionally. Being merciful and forgiving doesn’t *feel* moral. Correcting people feels moral. Being critical and analytical feels right and moral. And honestly, it feels pretty good! Because I believe I’m taking a stand on something, and there’s an adrenaline rush.

Mercy, however, doesn’t bring the adrenaline rush or the exhilaration—not at first. It feels soft, or seems weak; to some it might look like not caring, because it looks like we’re letting someone off the hook. And so, it doesn’t feel moral.

But being merciful is the most moral act that someone can carry out.

Because our mercy provides access to the mercy of God, which is access to the heart of God. And anything that provides access to the heart of God is as moral as it gets. God is love. God's nature is to forgive, and show mercy and kindness. Jesus even says that "God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." Wait, what?!? God is kind to the wicked?!? I can think of some ungrateful and wicked people right now. And I'm sure you can too. God is kind to *them*? That isn't right! (we think) But it's who God is. Because God is consistently offering everyone the opportunity to experience, and respond to, his grace. Even if they consistently reject it. And Jesus' teaching today is basically a call for us to be like God: "Be merciful as God is merciful"—that's Christian morality. And, that's a show of great strength! Not weakness. Try being merciful to everyone you encounter, for one week, and see if that doesn't require enormous inner strength.

Now, it needs to be said that there are situations where wrongs need to be made right (as we saw last week with "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness/justice). Where mercy can be extended, while at the same time restorative justice is carried out. Mercy and justice can, and often do, coincide. In fact I think they're supposed to coincide. That's why Bryan Stephenson's brilliant book is titled "*Just Mercy*." It's mercy that includes justice. And justice

that includes mercy. Sometimes reparations need to be made, even when mercy has been extended.

This is why hungering and thirsting for righteousness, and being merciful, come one after the other in the beatitudes. And, in Micah, doing justice and loving mercy also come one after the other. We can exercise justice without being vengeful; we can do it with a heart of mercy and forgiveness. And, we can be merciful while also working for justice.

Yet I'll be the first to confess, when I hear all of how Jesus expects us to act in the face of everything from everyday obnoxiousness to downright wickedness, I'm not so sure I want to follow this. It sounds too hard, or unrealistic, or not practical or useful in today's world. And, it doesn't seem fair.

Which is why, again, part of our discipleship with Jesus is learning how to do things that don't come naturally to us. What comes naturally to us, largely because of cultural conditioning, is to want to do something like get even, or unleash a verbal barrage, or to attempt take that speck out of someone else's eye—"here, let me *help* you—by showing you how wrong you are."

But this is the training that Jesus gives us, where we learn to train our reflexes and reactions to be more God-like over time. The phrase, "Be merciful, as God is merciful" might be a good internal mantra for us in tough situations. It

can be made into a breath prayer... It's a call to be like Jesus, who himself could've retaliated, but chose rather to love and forgive. This is the surpassing righteousness that Jesus talks about—which leads to right-relationship. Where we do the work of learning to choose mercy instead of reflexively choosing other forms of righteousness, or of being right.

As I mentioned at the beginning, the world needs God's people to choose mercy—even when others who claim to follow God don't speak and act with mercy. I have to discern and decide within myself, with God's help and guidance, *what kind of person I want to be*, and not let another who calls themselves a Christian but acts otherwise affect who I am and the decisions I make as I live my life in the world.

With everything going on in our divisive and rancorous society, the call to be people of mercy and kindness and justice is as strong as ever. It could be easy right now to say, “the heck with it” (or however you like to phrase that...), and pull in on ourselves, or throw things at the tv, or generally lash out. It can be overwhelming!

Our daughter, who studied psychology in college and grad school, once said that we have lost our “collective effervescence” as a society. That is, our collective sense of wellbeing and looking out for each other and working toward

common goals and the common good. And so, the call is as clear and important now as ever, for the sake of God and our common wellbeing, to choose mercy and kindness. And to support one another in our efforts to walk this path. We need each other, because we can't do this alone.

When we do the work of being merciful, we are being God-like in the best possible way. And the blessings flow, and, the blessings return to us.

The apostle James (2:13) affirms that "mercy triumphs over judgment."

Jeremiah affirms that God's mercies are new every morning. So, mercy begins by reflecting, perhaps daily, on ways that you and I have been shown mercy, and have experienced the heart of God. Then, we are able to extend mercy because we have experienced it.

This is what we celebrate at the table of grace this morning.

Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing