



A Life of Mercy

But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' (Matthew 9:13)

A disciple is someone who is actively learning from Jesus — in all areas of life. A disciple regularly responds to the two core questions of discipleship: (1) *What is Jesus saying?* and (2) *What am I doing in response?*

This week we look at **what Jesus says about mercy** and consider **what we should do in response**. More than something God does now and then, mercy is *who God is*. Jesus is the face of the Father's mercy. Whoever sees Jesus sees the Father (John 14:9), and by his words, his actions, and his entire person, Jesus reveals the mercy of God.

Renita Weems notes that, while Jesus of course came to meet the pressing needs of the people, feeding and healing them just as we are taught to do in our own day, his purpose is even larger, more comprehensive we might say, for he "comes to invite us into a totally different valuation of ourselves and of each other. He invites us into imagining with him a new community." **And at the center of that new community we find mercy.**

There's something surprising about mercy. Mathew Schmalz writes that **mercy is "showing love where it's not expected or merited, and doing so in an unexpected way."** Our lives as Christians, as disciples of Jesus, begin in gratitude for the mercy we have received from God, the love that is the very foundation of our lives. We are called to live out of that mercy in our relationships with others. What we have received, Jesus says we are to give. "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

When people needed mercy they went to Jesus. His life and teaching show us what the Father's mercy is like, what the kingdom of God is like, and what we are like when God reigns in our lives. What Jesus makes clear over and over is that the God who reigns is a God of mercy — and that the kingdom of this God is one where loving mercy shapes our lives and interactions. A life of mercy is a life that citizens of the kingdom of God live.

Merciful Like The Father (Luke 6:27-38)

As we saw in last week's lesson, Jesus is open and welcoming to all who approach him. Much to the dismay of the religious leaders of his day, he eats with and even forgives sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, and the unclean of all sorts.

Jesus' acts of mercy and the kingdom he proclaimed were unsettling. They aroused suspicion and were regarded as scandalous because they didn't conform to the expectations of what is proper and fair, of how life should be. God had become one of us, walking among us to show us the very face of mercy, to show us how to live a truly human, loving life.

Even at the lowest point in salvation history, in the execution of the Son of God, we see the most profound, unexpected demonstration of God's mercy. Despite what justice or fairness might demand for what humans had done, God does not destroy us or even abandon us. In the midst of his suffering and dying, Jesus is merciful and forgiving: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

In his infinite love, God does not allow rejection and death to have the last word. He raises Jesus to new life and pours out his own Spirit on his people. In mercy, God promises to be with us to the end of time. This is the mercy that is the source of our life and our hope. Alan Culpepper writes that this mercy is not "abstract" but "visceral, something that quite literally changes us from the inside out. As disciples of Jesus, we believe this inward, deep-rooted aspect of mercy comes in the relationship Jesus promises to all of us: a relationship based on forgiveness and love, reconciliation and truth." (Culpepper, *Luke*, 150)

We are called to live out of that mercy in our relationships with others. We want to live in light of Jesus' words and example: Merciful like the Father. It is Jesus who says, "Be merciful just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

This command in the Sermon on the Plain is part of a teaching directed to anyone willing to listen to his voice: "To you who hear I say, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. To the person who strikes you on one cheek, offer the other one as well, and from the person who takes your cloak, do not withhold even your tunic. Give to everyone who asks of you, and from the one who takes what is yours do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you." (6:27-31)

The key word is *everyone*, and Jesus summarizes this new life with the Golden Rule (6:31). Instead of retaliating, Jesus calls for attitudes and actions of mercy that seek the good of the other and build up the community. The disciples are to take positive steps that promote the welfare of those with whom they are in conflict.

Jesus continues, "For if you love those or do good to those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them." He reminds us that the easy way out won't get us very far in the eyes of God. So you do good to those who do good to you? Anyone can do that (6:32-34).

Jesus constantly argued with the Pharisees who were quick to judge *others* but not themselves: "Why do *your disciples* pick grain on the sabbath? Why do *you* dine with sinners and tax collectors?" And Jesus' response is this, "But rather, love your enemies and do good to them...then your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (6:35-36).

To be merciful, to love even those who we find hardest to love, is to participate fully in the life of God who is merciful. And Jesus shows us the steps of the way to reach our goal: “Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you...For the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Luke 6:37-38).

“The One Who Had Mercy” (Luke 10:25-37)

According to Jesus, mercy matters. It matters because we all need it. But mercy also matters because it is what can join us all together in spite of our differences. This is expressed in Jesus’ actions, his teaching, and also his parables, such as the one we find in Luke 10.

In response to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. A man was beaten up by robbers and left for dead along the side of the road. A priest and a Levite passed by and did nothing, even crossing to the other side of the road. A Samaritan, considered an enemy by Jesus’ hearers, was moved by compassion and helped him: treating his wounds, taking him to an inn, and paying for his care.

Upon completing the story, Jesus asks the expert, “Which of these three was a neighbor to this man?” In response, the expert can’t even bring himself to say the word “Samaritan.” Instead, he says, “**The one who had mercy on him.**” And Jesus replies, “**Go and do likewise.**” In other words, Jesus says, “Go act like a neighbor to *anyone* in need.” **And how does one act like a neighbor? By showing mercy.**

What this parable adds to our picture of mercy and the reign of God is the application to how we should act as citizens of this kingdom, when God’s word and God’s mercy reign in our lives. Bernard Brandon Scott says that **we have to “cross the lines” we’ve drawn** both individually and as communities, that every act of mercy, random or otherwise, toward an individual brother or sister is a starting point and an inspiration for wholesale kindness and compassion, woven into the fabric of our communities, our world, reminding us of who we all are as beloved children of God. We kick-start this kindness especially when we act in times and circumstances that are both costly and full of risk.

Jesus makes this clear: *my neighbor is always the next person I encounter, and I act like a neighbor by showing mercy. This is what it means to “go and do likewise.”*

Limits on Mercy? (Matthew 18:21-35)

Jesus adds a further dimension to his command to “go and do likewise” in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21-35). Peter asked Jesus how many times he must forgive one who has treated him badly. In other words, is there a limit to the mercy I am to show others? Jesus answers that he must forgive not just seven times but seventy-seven times, suggesting an unlimited number. He then tells the story of the “unmerciful servant” to illustrate how mercy is to flow through our lives.

A servant who owed his master a great debt but could not pay was to be sold into slavery along with his whole family. He begs the master for mercy and time to repay the loan. “Moved with compassion, the master ... let him go and forgave him the loan.” This servant then meets another who owed him a small debt and couldn’t pay. The second servant begs for mercy and time to repay the debt but the forgiven servant refuses and throws him in prison. When the master learns of this he calls in the one whose loan had been forgiven and says, “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you? Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt.” Jesus concludes: “So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

Jesus' expectation of his disciples was that they would show mercy just as they themselves had received mercy; this was one of the key attitudes that Jesus highlighted. He affirms that mercy is not only an action of the Father, it becomes a standard for discovering who his true children are. In short, we are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us. Once we can accept mercy, it is almost natural to hand it on to others. We become a conduit of what we ourselves have received.

Marked by Mercy

In his reflection on Jesus' teachings of mercy (especially in the Sermon on the Plain), Walter Brueggemann imagines Jesus encouraging and inspiring his followers (including us) when they are tempted to strike back, to even things out. Jesus tells them to think "larger" than that: "***You know more and you know differently, and you have freedom to act differently. You know about the large purposes of God, and you are called to act concretely as though the purposes of God really did make a difference in your life.***" This begins with mercy.

Jesus entrusted the continuing work of mercy in a special way to his church, both individually in the work of all who are disciples, and collectively in the work of the church as a community. This work of mercy goes to the very heart of our identity and mission Christians and of what it means to be church. Mercy is not a virtue that we choose to put on one day. Mercy has to be our deepest way of seeing, a generosity of spirit that draws from our identity as disciples of Jesus.

As Don Kettler observes, this identity as disciples of Jesus is made known by our actions: "**In imitation of Christ, we must put mercy ahead of judgment, openness ahead of exclusion, bridges before walls.** This must be expressed in our gestures, attitudes, and actions even more than in our words. This practice of mercy is necessary to be effective in reaching those who have disregarded or even abandoned the church, often because the Church simply has no credibility to them. We are not to just wait for people to come in but, like the merciful father, we go out to meet them where they are, bringing the good news of God's mercy to them in our words and actions."

Brian Zahnd rightly observes that "we are living in a moment marked by mean-spiritedness." And in this moment we must pray that the church would be something other. **That instead of conforming to the current ethos of anger, division, and condemnation, we would conform to the mercy of Christ.** In the current social and political climate of our country, **this mercy can begin by opening ourselves to those whom we are quick to judge or might strongly disagree.** Mercy doesn't end there, of course, but it begins with such small acts of understanding, which can lead to life-changing experiences of love.

Remember what James the brother of Jesus said: "*Judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.*" (James 2:13). **Mercy triumphs over judgment.** And as Zahnd suggests in the examples below, this is a life we can live right now in the most practical of ways:

- When you can blame...have mercy.
- When you can criticize...have mercy.
- When you can condemn...have mercy.
- When you have a political disagreement...have mercy.
- When you have a theological disagreement...have mercy.
- When you are certain you are completely right...have mercy.
- When you can get revenge and get even...have mercy.

So that when we pray, “Lord, have mercy on me” there will be a large reservoir of mercy for God to draw from.

Imagine what the world would look like if followers of Jesus committed themselves to the small acts of mercy listed above. I don’t expect us always agree with each other. But I do find great joy whenever I encounter mercy that makes room for us all.

And as we inch closer to end of another year, I’m praying that the body of Christ will be more marked by mercy and less characterized by judgment. I’m praying that when mean-spiritedness reaches a fever pitch during this election season, the church will be a haven of mercy and a sanctuary of peace. My prayer is that we who are followers of Jesus would be known, not for meanness, but for mercy. Like Jesus was.

Most of all I’m praying that I will live as answer to my own prayer. Perhaps you will pray this too.¹

Discussion

1. One definition of mercy is “*showing love where it’s not expected or merited, and doing so in an unexpected way.*” Would you change or add anything to this definition? In the context of discipleship, what does the word *mercy* mean to you?
2. What is one quote or idea from Luke 6:27-36 that stands out to you? Are there ways we have forgotten to show and live the way of mercy in our culture? Why do you think this has happened? What are some things that make it difficult to be merciful, especially in our daily interactions with co-workers, friends, or family?
3. “*Mercy can begin by opening ourselves to those whom we are quick to judge or might strongly disagree...it begins with such small acts of understanding, which can lead to life-changing experiences of love.*”
 - What is your reaction to this statement? Given that we tend to associate with people who look and think like us, how do we learn to open ourselves to others and seek understanding?
 - If you have witnessed or experienced an example of this in your life, share it with the group.
4. What do you think James means when he writes that “judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy” (James 2:13)? When have you seen mercy triumph over judgment?
5. As disciples of Jesus, what does it look like to model mercy in our individual lives in 2020? What are some concrete ways we can do this at home, at work, or wherever we find ourselves? What does it look like for the church to model mercy in 2020?

¹ These closing thoughts are adapted from the articles “Mercy in a Mean Time” and “Marked by Mercy” by Brian Zahnd