

Epiphany + 7, February 20, 2022

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Luke 6:27-38

St. Andrew Lutheran Church

The trouble with the way we read scripture in community is that each Sunday we get to hear only a very small part of a much bigger story. It's like we get a one-inch-square sample (like a puzzle piece) of an elaborate and intricate picture that is really a much, much larger! The larger image includes the whole picture that is the gospel narrative.

How do we make sense of each Sunday's one-inch square when it's removed from the larger picture? I really wish we would read the entire gospel of Luke. I really do! Every Sunday! And then focus on that day's small portion of the text. But that's not what we do. So it's the work of the sermon to color in all the surrounding parts that help us to see the larger truth of each tiny portion. So let's look at today's one-inch square in light of the scene that surrounds it.

Today's text is part of what's known as Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. The first part of it was last Sunday. The scene begins with a great act of mercy. Jesus has just come down from a mountain along with a big crowd of his disciples, and he was met on the plain by a huge gathering of people (a great multitude in fact) from all over the place — probably a mix of different ethnicities and race, and everywhere on the social, political, economic, religious, spectrum. But they all had one thing in common. They were in desperate need of healing.

So in a demonstration of great mercy, Jesus allowed power to come from him, and he gave it away. He healed everybody who needed it. He healed them all! No discrimination. No exclusion. No insurance cards required. No expectation of anything in return. Jesus didn't stay in a silo of only people who look like him, think like him, or worship like him. He opened his heart in love for all them all.

Then he looked at his disciples where they all stood together on that level ground, and he began to teach them a new concept of equality — God's

concept of equality, in which there will be no group of people who have an overabundance of what's needed for a complete life while another group goes without enough of what's needed for a complete life. It's a poetic picture of what God's commonwealth looks like.

It's all great that Jesus begins his level-ground sermon with a demonstration of great mercy. But as he continues, he reveals how that mercy turns the structure of our world upside down in order to make provision of plenty for those who don't have enough. And that...necessitates that those of us who have more than we need that we let go of some of it. That picture certainly might make some of those who would follow Jesus stop listening. It seems that some of the crowd did stopped listening, because, according to the Greek verb structure, Jesus begins today's little picture square with, "...I say to you that are still listening..."

He tells them what "following him" is about and how they (how we) can participate in the world of God that is built on mercy. This part of his level-ground sermon might be some of the most difficult words for us to hear and try to emulate. Jesus introduces the notion of loving enemies and offering the other cheek — which just goes against our nature. Jesus really is calling on us to live a life of non-retaliation — of loving, doing good to, blessing, and praying for those who don't love, do good to, bless, or pray for us.

All of us might say this is impossible. At this point, not only might we want to stop listening, we might want to look away from the picture. Maybe we don't want to see any more of the image of God's world of mercy.

But Jesus continues. He calls for us to lend without expecting anything in return! It's not ok to hoard our abundance while there are people who don't have enough. We are simply to give with no strings attached. Now, that's just opposite the way our socio-economic structure is organized! Jesus tells us that God's commonwealth is built on mercy. Give without strings, it's not quid-pro-quo. And he calls us — expects us — to be practitioners of that mercy.

It's a good thing God's love for us isn't dependent on our ability to do these

things perfectly, because I certainly fall short. We all fall short. Again, we think this is impossible.

But let's remember the whole gospel picture! This is exactly the way Jesus lived his life. Loving enemies. Doing good in response to hate. Blessing in the face of curses. Praying for his abusers. Offering his cheek to those who would strike him. Giving of himself to anyone who asks — without expectation of repayment. No judgment or condemnation. Forgiveness of those who literally take his life. This is mercy!

From his first sermon of good news to the poor, recovery of sight, and release of captives to the cross and his last words of forgiveness for the ones who put him there, there is mercy in everything he says and everything he does — non-retaliation, loving enemies, giving his very last breath to mercy for those who hate him.

This is what following him is about. He calls us to be builders of God's world of mercy, the kind of mercy that can only be inherited from God's own self. And we, as children of the Most High, are inheritors of all that is God's. Thus we have, inside us, the capacity for that kind of mercy. We carry that mercy just as we carry Christ's own self into the world. Even, imperfect as we are, as we go about loving, doing good, lending without expectation, and forgiving, we are creating, building the commonwealth of God that is built on mercy.

If we take this one-inch square and imagine or act as if it contains the whole gospel picture, we end up with a terrible distortion that might seem like just another system of quid-pro-quo — the exact opposite of what the gospel is about. (And I can tell you that probably the most difficult people for me to love are those who would use this scripture of non-retaliation to manipulate someone to stay in an abusive relationship.)

Taken out of context, scripture can be dangerous.

Without knowing what's surrounding our one-inch square, we might imagine Jesus is describing just a new system of exchange. But when we look at the entire picture of Jesus' gospel, we see that we're all beneficiaries of the entire life and mission and mercy of Christ. By following him and living as he

lived, in this case not judging or condemning but forgiving and giving, we are bringing about a world free of judgment and condemnation and filled with forgiveness and generosity.

Even with our imperfect attempts to live a life of mercy, we will receive that which we sow, a good measure pressed down, shaken together, and running over flowing. A world of mercy. God's world of mercy.

