

Fourth Sunday after Trinity
The Reverend David A. Brounstein
St. Matthew's Church
9 July 2006

This morning's Gospel lesson from St. Luke is part of the 'sermon on the plain.' It parallels the teachings of Jesus that we find in St. Matthew's 'sermon on the mount.' There are some who make much of the subtle differences between the two presentations. Rather than trying to reconcile each point of the respective Evangelist's synopsis of the sermon, we will embrace the broader perspective that Jesus taught a consistent message to diverse audiences throughout the course of his earthly ministry.

Our text opens with the command from Jesus to his disciples, "Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful." When we find the word 'therefore' in a passage, its purpose is to succinctly summarize the preceding illustration or teaching.

It might be more palatable and somewhat easier if this mercy that Jesus spoke of was to be extended to just a narrow circle of friends and family. This small and intimate group alone would provide challenges and difficulties sufficient for a lifetime. Instead, Jesus chose to include in his example those who are our enemies, those who abuse and curse us, and those who take from us and either cannot or will not repay, to name but a few.

Jesus addresses the natural human tendency to desire mercy for our own misdeeds and foibles while sincerely praying for nothing short of apocalyptic judgment on the shortcomings others.

We find the word mercy, 'chesed' in Hebrew, throughout both the Old and New Testaments where it is frequently used to describe one of the attributes of God. The Hebrew meaning includes not only mercy, but kindness, loyalty, and benevolence. 'Chesed' may be described as part of God's covenant with humanity, a commitment to a relationship that extends into eternity.

The 136th Psalm is one of my favorites. The first part of each verse speaks progressively of God's grace, His work of Creation, His deliverance of Israel, and His provision of food for all flesh. The second part of each verse chimes the refrain, "for his mercy endureth forever."

There are some who sentimentalize the command to be merciful and uncritically forgive everyone for everything. But mercy does not stand alone. The Scriptures frequently combine mercy with the ever-present realities of truth, righteousness, judgment, and peace. In choosing to be merciful in obedience to the teachings of our Lord, we should never become blind to the truth or in any way fail to acknowledge the real pain and hurt we have encountered along the way. We should extend mercy in ways that allow ourselves and others to be responsible, caring, and balanced.

Jesus said, “Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.” Perhaps our understanding of the command to be merciful to others will be aided when we consider how God has been merciful to us.

The purpose of the Gospels and all the teachings of Jesus contained therein was to point the way to the Passion and Cross of Christ. The blood of Jesus shed upon the Cross is the focal point of the Father’s mercy and salvation provided to all humanity.

What are some specific ways we can be merciful? Church tradition has adopted from the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, and the sermon by Jesus on the Last Judgment (Mt. 25:31-46) what are often called “The Corporal Works of Mercy.” They minister to the physical needs of people.

These include:

1. Feeding the hungry – one of things that we do on a regular basis here at St. Matthew’s through our food outreach with FISH
2. Sheltering the homeless – such as sending youth teams on summer work projects to Louisiana or providing tsunami assistance
3. Clothing the naked – such as continued support of the mission in Haiti or the Mexico orphanage
4. Visiting the sick or imprisoned – such as visiting the infirmed by both clergy and laity
5. Giving water to the thirsty – probably some overlap here with food and shelter to those in need
6. Supporting freedom for hostages
7. Burying the dead – both Anglicans and others receive bereavement ministry from dedicated lay volunteers, staff, as well as the clergy

There are also “The Spiritual Works of Mercy” which address spiritual needs of heart, mind, and soul.

These include:

1. Instructing the ignorant – education in the faith for young and old alike
2. Correcting the sinful
3. Counseling the doubtful
4. Being patient with sinners and those in error
5. Forgiving others
6. Comforting the afflicted
7. Praying for the living and the dead

Hopefully you have noticed that there is no ordination pre-requisite to become involved with the extension of mercy. It is part of every Christian’s vocation.

Therefore let us be merciful to others as we remember the mercy we have received.

The Old Testament prophet Micah said it well, (Mi 6:8), quote, “He hath showed thee, O Man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.”