

4th Sunday after Trinity

Texts: Genesis 50:15-21; Rom 12:14-21; Luke 6:36-42

July 5, 2020

What If...?

[Read these texts BEFORE reading this sermon!] I wonder how different our “Christian nation” would look/sound today if people simply heeded God’s Word. Just consider the three texts appointed for today’s meditation. How very different things would be if “*we the people*” actually put these words into practice. Consider the example that Joseph sets before us. He actually puts into practice everything that Paul speaks of in his epistle to the Romans. *What if we were all like Joseph?*** Joseph had ***every right/reason*** to exact vengeance on his wicked brothers, who years earlier had beaten him up and sold him into slavery simply because they hated the fact that he was dad’s favorite. Oh, how the tables have now turned! Look who’s on top now, and it’s right when these wicked brothers need a HUGE favor too! Joseph could have brought down all kinds of wrath on these guys (and they deserved every bit of it and more, and no one would ever fault Joseph for doing so). ***BUT... he didn’t do it.*** In fact, he did just the **opposite**. Rather than seeking vengeance or reparations or pounds of flesh, he showed ***mercy***. “‘*Vengeance is MINE,*’ says the Lord.” Or as Joseph himself puts it: “*Am I in the place of God?*” It’s God’s job to exact vengeance. Revenge is not part of the Christian vocabulary or the Christian life. Joseph didn’t give them what they so justly deserved. It wasn’t his place to do so. Instead, he showed them mercy. More than that, he showed them grace. ***He gave them everything they didn’t deserve.*** And he did all of this, not because he was a wimp or because the brothers won him over with their pathetically concocted tale about dad begging for their forgiveness from his deathbed. Nope. He did all this simply because that’s what God did for him. God showed sinful Joseph mercy/grace throughout his sinful life. Joseph, in turn, treated everyone else—even his wicked brothers—the same way his Lord treated him. ***What if we all behaved like faithful Joseph?***

Consider, also, Jesus’ own red-letter words about not judging others and not condemning others and first taking the hypocritical logs out of our own eyes before we start picking at the specks in the other person’s eye. What if “*we the people*” actually lived by these words, right? It’s at this point I will ***strongly*** caution you. You know as well as I do that when you pluck a few words or a few phrases out of context, **things go bad quickly**. Case in point: “Judge not.” We can quote those two words perfectly, especially when we’re feeling ***challenged or oppressed or demonized*** for our personal choices and behaviors. Everything else in this text tends to blurred out and muffled out. It’s like the rest of the words aren’t even there. “Judge not.” That’s all we hear/know. That’s all we need to know, right? More importantly, that’s all everyone else needs to know.

Folks: This may surprise some of you, but those two words don’t mean what everyone ***wants*** them to mean. Those words do not mean that we are ***prohibited*** from ***ever*** distinguishing /judging between what is good/God-pleasing

and what is evil; between goodness and sinfulness. So often today people say “*You can’t judge me! You can’t tell me that my choices/behaviors are wicked/evil. How dare you! Judge not, lest ye be judged!*” (It is amazing how EVERYONE can quote Scripture when it suits them, right?) This is **NOT** the meaning of this text. The Lord is referring here to a critical attitude, one that *despises and condemns* others, saying “*I am holier than you. I am better than you. I am above you.*” That’s not an attitude of gracious forgiveness and humble mercy, is it? That’s an attitude of self-righteous condemnation; a Pharisaical attitude that only seeks to lord over others. ***We are not above our Lord and Master, are we?*** (Yes, I said “Master.” Jesus is my Master, and I am His slave, for He purchased me from the bonds of sin, death, and the devil with His own precious lifeblood. I will never apologize for using the very language that St. Paul uses and my own Lord uses to refer to me and to Himself. I am not ashamed of the Gospel. You may cancel me, but you can’t cancel God. I digress.) ***Contrary to popular opinion, we are not smarter than God. We are not above our Teacher. We still have so much to learn!*** Self-righteous condemnation of others and lording over others: Your Lord will have **NONE** of that! “*Be merciful, just as/even as your Father is merciful.*” How often we forget that part. How often we don’t even hear that part...even though they’re the FIRST words of the text! ***Guys: That’s the whole key to understanding and making sense of this text!*** That’s the whole key to understanding and making sense of the Christian faith/life! Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful... to you.

And this should not just be theory, but actually practiced, day in and day out. In fact, this same mercy that God has so unconditionally shown to us **must** be reflected in our lives. Yes, I said “**MUST.**” I know that sounds very law-oriented, but it’s not. I’m not saying that you **must** to do your part **in order to be saved**. No! That can never be. It’s simply impossible to save yourself. You don’t have to show mercy **before** God will show you mercy. That’s not how God works. **But...to not show mercy; to not bear the fruits of mercy is to not be of the Father. It’s not Christian.** As a redeemed child of God—a child of mercy—when someone does wrong against us, our will and desire **MUST** be to forgive them, and if possible, restore a good relationship between them and us. That’s how God treats us, right? **Because** of God’s mercy to us, mercy is the fruit of the Holy Spirit that we, in turn, bear in our daily lives. It’s a very **natural, effortless** thing. Good fruit trees naturally bear good fruit, right? By grace, through faith, we’ve been grafted to the Vine of Life that is Jesus. We’ve been grafted to His cross; His tree of Life. The fruit that we naturally bear in response is the **cruciform, blood-stained fruit of Christ’s unconditional love and mercy**. When the world sees you or hears you, they should see and hear Christ. Do they?

When there is a conflict between ourselves and others, what is our desire? Maybe that’s the wrong question. What **ought to be** our desire? As a baptized and completely forgiven child of the heavenly Father, our desire should **NOT** be for

revenge. Our desire should **NOT** be to make them suffer because they've made us suffer in some way, shape, or form. **Why?** Why does the Christian **NOT** desire the pound of flesh from his/her neighbor, even though they may rightly deserve it? Well...for starters the Christian knows and believes what God says about vengeance. "*Vengeance is Mine, so sayeth the Lord.*" There's also the fact that the faithful Christian knows their own reality *corum Deo*; that is, **before God**. The Christian knows that they've done bad and evil things against God and His holy Law, and He hasn't ever dealt with us in a wrathful, vengeful way; the **same wrathful, vengeful way** that we dare to deal with others when they do the same exact things we do.

Let that sink in. God, who is holy and just and righteous, has every right to immediately punish us and condemn us to eternal, hellish death and damnation for our sins... even the little ones that everyone else does too. God has every right to demand, not just pounds of flesh from us, but our entire lives as reparation for our sins against Him. ***But...that's not how our God and Father deals with us, is it?*** What does God do instead? Answer: He sent His only-begotten Son to perfectly fulfill the Law in our place—the perfect Law of God that we cannot and do not fulfill—to suffer our justly-deserved punishment and death on the cross. He sent His only-begotten Son to make full and complete repayment for each and every one of our sins simply because we can't repay that impossible debt; not for one single sin, and certainly not for a lifetime worth of them. ***In short, He is merciful to us; merciful to us through Christ and because of Christ.***

"Be merciful, just as your heavenly Father is merciful"...to you. If there's one thing you take away from today, I pray that this is it. If there's one thing you want to focus on today, ***focus on God's mercy and love to you.*** Focus on Christ; the very epitome of God's mercy and love for you; God's mercy and love for you in the flesh and in your very presence right here and right now. And when you depart this place today and make your way back out into this shadowy valley of sin, death, and despair, ***go forth in repentant joy.*** Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with the Good that is Christ and His mercy, His grace, His love, and His peace. Deal with one another and with all the other people God brings you into contact with ***in the love and mercy that God has so unconditionally and fully shown to you in Christ Jesus.***

What if...? Folks: The merciful love of God in Christ changes things. It changes hearts. It changes minds. It changes death to life. It changes tears of sorrow and fear to tears of joy and peace. By God's grace, may this same Christ-centered merciful love be witnessed in you, and never in spite of you. May this peace of Christ, which surpasses all human understanding, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Him. **AMEN**