

## Jesus' Beatitudes: Heavenly Wisdom to Chart Our Reset

5th in 8-Sermon Series:

***Blessed are the Merciful***

Matthew 5:3-7 ~ Matthew 18:21-35

9th Sunday after Pentecost ~ August 2, 2020 ~ Sacrament of Holy Communion

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### *Introduction:*

I don't think it's an accident that Jesus placed this one smack in the middle of his nine "Blessed are" statements that we call the beatitudes. I don't think it's an accident for two reasons: first, the call to be merciful, to forgive others who have wronged us, is at the core of following Christ. Second, maybe just maybe Jesus knew it would be best to work up to this one slowly, since it's really hard to do. If we are honest.

Most of us don't do mercy very well or very willingly. Forgive someone who has wronged us? Why? Why should we? Whether we like it or not, mercy is at the core of God's nature, as we learn all the way back in Exodus 34:6. Just before God gives Moses a second chance with the second set of ten commandments, we hear this self-description: "God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." Straight from the heart of the Torah into the heart of Christianity: Was not raising Jesus from the dead, God's greatest mercy of all? Indeed, I believe we are all grateful for God's infinite mercy. But how are we supposed to do mercy? How do we tap into that wellspring?

Peter was wrestling with this very question in our second scripture lesson. We can be thankful to Peter for his out loud, unfiltered, habit of questioning Jesus. At this moment, Peter puts it to Jesus, saying, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" You can almost see him winking to his buddies, "OK let's see just how far he expects us to go with this forgiveness thing." This parable, found only in Matthew, appears to have been inspired (or provoked) by Peter's cheeky question. It is a story so crazy and shocking, so over the top, almost cartoonish, that we can be sure Jesus wanted to make sure they got the point. But did they? Do we?

### *Communion Meditation*

I will begin with a story told by Thomas Merton from the *Wisdom of the Desert* and it goes like this:

*Certain of the brethren said to Abba Anthony (one of the Desert Fathers): We would like you to tell us some word, by which we may be saved. Then the elder said: You have heard the Scriptures, they ought to be enough for you. But they said, "We want to hear something also from you, Father. The elder answered them: You have heard the Lord say: If a man strikes you on the left cheek, show him also the other one. They said to him, "This we cannot do. He said to them: If you can't turn the other cheek, at least take it patiently on one of them. They replied, We can't do that either. He said: If you cannot even do that, at least do not go striking others more than you would want them to strike you. They said: We cannot do this either. Then the elder said to his*

*disciple: Go cook up some food for these brethren, for they are very weak. Finally he said to them: If you cannot even do this, how can I help you? All I can do is pray.<sup>i</sup>*

Well, friends: this fifth beatitude is another one of those “do-attitudes.” It is less an attribute of how to be, and more an activity: something to be done. It is a call to forgive. You saw how ticked off the king became when the unforgiving servant got it wrong. That was hard to miss. Obviously, the unforgiving servant messed up big time. But rather than focusing on the punishment and the other very rough edges of this story, let’s make sure we get the main point of this parable, the message of this meditation, and the center point of this core beatitude: Mercy breaks the power that wrong can hold over us—if we choose to do mercy.

When we choose to do mercy, we can participate in the mystery of God’s Love and God’s power to heal all the hurt and the injustice in this world that Christ came to save. God’s mercy to each of us is the starting point and the sustaining point. One way to think about it is with our bodies. We depend on God’s mercy like we depend on oxygen to breathe. If we breathe in God’s mercy to us, we can breathe out God’s mercy to others. And we can do what seems impossible otherwise.

Yes: Mercy gives us the power to withhold our judgment. Especially in these COVID crisis days where attitudes toward the pandemic, from what it actually is, to how best we need to respond to it, are painfully divided and divisive, perhaps we need to tattoo this one on our foreheads. What risks are worth taking? Where and how to wear masks, to travel, to socialize: we all have our opinions that we are sure are right. But mercy calls us to lead with grace, not judgment. As John’s prologue poetically reminds us, “For we have all received grace upon grace.” (John 1:16)

We are not talking about “cheap grace”, Jesus did not die on the cross for, “cheap grace.” So, I want to be clear about what forgiveness is not. Too often we Christians play fast and loose with what is disguised by the word “forgiveness” to excuse or ignore what is abuse and injustice. Here are three things forgiveness IS NOT:

- Forgiveness does not deny our hurt. Forgiveness is possible only when we acknowledge our hurt and the negative impact of that person’s actions or attitudes on our lives. Until we are honest about our feelings, forgiveness has no meaning.
- To forgive is not to excuse unjust behavior. “Evil actions are manifestly not all right. They are sins.” To forgive is not to say that what was done was OK.
- And third, to forgive is not necessarily to forget. In fact, there are sins that would be absolutely wrong to forget. Those of us with European roots are wrong to ask Indigenous Americans or African Americans to forget the way their ancestors and they have been treated by the cultural majority in our nation. Nor must we ever forget the horrors of the Holocaust. Brutalities and injustice must not be forgotten if we are to avoid replaying them.<sup>ii</sup>

Now, let us turn to what mercy or forgiveness, IS. Mercy is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment-however justified

that judgment may be. Mercy is the choice to leave behind our resentment and our desire for retribution however fair such punishment may seem. As long as we hold onto the evil, those wounds have the power to hold us trapped in a continual replay of the wrong committed. Mercy breaks the power that wrong holds over us. To be merciful is to choose to participate in the mystery and power of God's love. Don't try to understand it, because we cannot. Rather it is mercy that draws us right into the heart of Divine life: where there is an infinite ocean of mercy, not bound by numbers like 7, 7 x7, 70 x7, or \$100,000.

Did you know that humans evolved with *both* impulses and capacities, for both revenge and forgiveness? In a study of sixty different cultures around the world, 95% had some form of blood revenge. But 93% also displayed examples of forgiveness or reconciliation. "Primatologist Fran de Waal believes these activities are also common in the animal kingdom. Chimps kiss and make up, and it seems that many other species do as well. Not only apes like us but also sheep, goats, hyenas, and dolphins. Of the species that have been studied, only domestic cats have failed to show behavior that reconciles relationships after conflict. (This finding will not surprise anyone who has cats.)" <sup>iii</sup>

Friends, as hard as it can seem. God has given us the capacity, deep in the marrow of our homo sapiens souls to be merciful. We can do mercy! When we choose to forgive, we break the cycle and we can be unbound, and become free to fight injustice, to work for healing everywhere we can. The Latin word of mercy, "Eleison" literally means "to unbind." When we forgive, we not only loose others from our anger and vengefulness, but we also free ourselves in the process.

A series of meditations on the Syrian Aramaic version of the Lord's Prayer opens up this dynamic vividly. Aramaic was the language Jesus spoke. Digging into the Aramaic, we can get beyond the typical debt/debtors vs. trespasses vs. sins debates on the forgiveness phrase that trips up Christians from different churches when they pray it together. Consider these alternative translations based on various connotations of the Aramaic words Jesus might have spoken:

*Loose the cord of mistakes binding us, as we release the strands we hold of others' guilt.  
Lighten our load of secret debts as we relieve others of their need to repay.*

*Forgive our hidden past, the secret shames, as we consistently forgive what others hide.*

I think what Jesus is teaching us here, in today's parable, in the Lord's prayer is the reciprocal relationship, like breathing in and breathing out, of God's mercy to us and our mercy to others.<sup>iv</sup>

Like the Abba Anthony asked his disciple to do for those "weak brethren", Jesus has cooked up some food for us at this Table. This communion table is our Table of mercy. It is the place where Jesus invites to bring our bitterness, our hate, our resentment, and be released of those bonds that bind our hearts and prevent us from letting the might of mercy do God's work in and through us.

Perhaps you have someone or something in your life right now that you feel like you are not able to forgive. At this Table Jesus is saying, "Yes, with my help, you can. Take, eat." Soon,

you will hear me say our “Words of Institution” taken from Jesus’ words, “Take, eat, do this, remembering me.” Today, let’s consider more fully: what is he really asking us to do? I don’t think it was only about literally ingesting the bread and the wine and experiencing Christ’s presence, while having a good thought about Jesus. That’s certainly an important part of it. But this beatitude reminds us that there is more. We are being invited to taste and see, to hear and feel God’s mercy around and within us, so that we may become more merciful. “Do this, remembering me.”

Do what? Do mercy.

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<sup>i</sup>Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, (New Directions: New York, NY, 1960), pp.75-76.

<sup>ii</sup> Marjorie J. Thompson, “Moving Toward Forgiveness,” *The Weavings Reader: Living wiith God in the World*, John S. Mogabgab, Editor, (Upper Room Books: Nashville, TN, 1993), pp.215-221. The distinction between what forgiveness is not and what forgiveness is, come from this article.

<sup>iii</sup> His Holiness the Dalai Lama & Archbishop Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy*, (Penguin Random House: New York, NY, 2016), pp.235-236.

<sup>iv</sup> Marjorie J. Thompson, *Ibid*.