

Luke 6: 36-38, 43-49 "For Good Measure" Rev. Janet Chapman 10/28/18

Some of you may have heard of "The Moth" Radio Hour featured on over 450 public radio stations. It is a Peabody award winning weekend afternoon show which shares true, humorous, heartbreaking and poignant tales which captivate and surprise audiences with their honesty and bravery. Back in 2017, the radio show featured Greg Audel, talking about his childhood growing up in a home with no rules. His parents were, as he states, "busy with their own things," and didn't place many expectations on his habits or behavior. He slept when he wanted, ate what he wanted, and went to school when he felt like it – which wasn't often. When he was 12, something shifted. He started going to a private school about 30 miles from his home. There he became friends with another boy who lived much closer to the school. He started spending time at this friend's home. Greg remembers that the first time he went home with his friend, they had after-school snacks. "Well, isn't that quaint?" he thought to himself. The first time he heard his friend's dad ask to see his homework, Greg said to his friend, "Are you just going to take that from him?" But then, his friend's mother told them it was time to get ready for bed. And Greg teared up... Never in life had anyone told him to go to bed. He then went into the bathroom... where a toothbrush had been laid out for him. The mom stuck her head in and said, "If you want to throw your clothes in the hamper, I'll be happy to wash them for you." So that by the time they got to bed, Greg was literally sobbing... because he had never experienced measurable expressions of mercy and love before. For the first time ever, he saw that "rules, routines, and structure... had value." So you heard it here first, any of you who doubted: bedtime, homework, and curfew... that is the language of love and mercy, a behavior we offer as a gift for good measure not just to our kids, but to our God, as we seek to live out the words, "Be merciful, just as your Creator and Heavenly Parent is merciful."

Now I don't have young children anymore but I did have a rescue dog I was fostering on his way towards adoption in Portland and I was reminded again of the importance of rules, routines, and structure. Kane, the terrier mix who joined my household for a few days, had been in an animal shelter for several months in the Fresno area. As such, according to the Director, he lacked a home structure – he had forgotten what it was to have a set bedtime, the appropriate place to use the bathroom, what it was to snuggle with and please an alpha as was his nature. But it only took 48 hours for that to come back and by Saturday morning, when I sent him off in Elsa's car, his grateful gaze was measurable by any standard – how much more powerful it is to do the same with a human being. Sharing expectations and maintaining boundaries is what shapes a sense of belonging and forges a connection. To do so helps foster love and build character.

This is at the heart of the Sermon on the Plain from which our scripture comes. The Sermon on the Plain is Luke's version of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from Matthew. It is called this because here Jesus goes to a "level place" in order to preach. Just before our passage, Jesus is talking about loving your enemies and explaining there isn't anything special about loving those who love you back. The tough part comes in loving those who haven't known love in their lives, who have felt the pain of abandonment, isolation, oppression, condemnation and judgment. He even goes so far as to say we need to lend to people whom we know can't pay us back, and not expecting anything in return. Then Jesus provides a profound theological reason for doing so – it is because God is kind to ungrateful, often misguided people. For most, when Jesus starts talking about money, this is where we close off, particularly when it comes to lending money which is risky business. The sad reality is, however, that Jesus talks more about

money than any other subject in the gospels. But we know there's too much likelihood that relationships will be damaged when money gets involved; it's just buying trouble as one friend used to tell me. As long as Jesus talks about loving and doing good, I can get on board with that, but the talk of money changes things. "Give and it will be given to you," Jesus says. But what if they take the money I give them and use it to go to Vegas or play Powerball or buy drugs? What if I know they will never repay me – isn't that just irresponsible? For myself, I have found it easier to justify taking someone and personally buying them what they need rather than handing over cash. But this week a colleague of mine pointed out that maybe the use of my gift is ultimately between the recipient and God. It isn't my responsibility to judge. Is that what Jesus means when he says, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned"? This prompted me to ask what if I am the one who is ungrateful, even misguided, in how I handle what God has given me? What if I am the one who needs God's mercy and forgiveness when I have failed to do the right thing? I guess my only hope is that I can try to listen to the Spirit's nudgings more clearly, trusting that God can work even in the most unlikely folks... and maybe I also need to pray that God is more generous than I will ever be. "Be merciful, just like God is merciful."

The truth is that Jesus' words of encouragement towards giving often have more to do with us, the givers, than with the receivers. Jesus is trying to teach us, just like any good teacher, what it is to have character, integrity, and a spirit of generosity. It all begins with the heart of a person as the necessary foundation for proper action and speech. In ancient Mediterranean culture, the heart is not the seat of emotions like we understand it now, but it was the seat of decision making, the place where reason and emotions meet. In that sense, it is

the place where judgments and choices are made and from which actions are taken. Therefore, when one does good, the text says, “A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap.” Be careful, however, not to mistake this as an even transaction nor a secret for winning the lottery. But when we give and keep giving, the world becomes better. There is also no insinuation that people are born knowing how to do good but must be taught it, like Greg in our earlier story. Goodness must be gathered, collected and formed and it is not a quick or easy process. If we take Jesus as our model, then we recognize that he didn’t just share mercy with those who were suffering, but for good measure, sought to relieve the cause of their suffering. As friend Dr. Jon Berquist, President of DSF states, “When God sees a stumbling block that keeps tripping people, God doesn’t just kiss the knees of those who fall and tell them it will be ok. God takes away the rock (for good measure through folks like you and I) so that it never hurts again.”

You and I are invited to foster times and places where suffering is relieved, where people can be brought together in forgiveness and without judgment. There is a brilliant film called *Babette’s Feast* which exemplifies this reality. Babette is a refugee exiled during the Civil War in Paris, who goes to work as a maid and cook for 2 elderly sisters in an isolated village of Norway. Villagers there are divided over politics, economics, health and more, as insults and infractions become the norm of the little town. One summer day, this refugee Babette receives a letter that she has won the French lottery. The sisters are shocked as she asks permission to spend her winnings on a feast to celebrate their late father’s birthday. She spends weeks in preparation until the evening comes and a somber, skeptic, and fearful group gathers around a now lavishly set dining room table. They grumble that they will eat this one luxurious and

wasteful meal but not enjoy it. Invited is the local wealthy village aristocrat who becomes the narrator of the glorious meal. He explains dish after sumptuous dish lovingly prepared by the refugee, who is giving them all that she possesses. Gradually, the grace of the meal, but most importantly of the woman preparing the dishes, begins to fill the room with a glorious radiance and heavenly light. Joy and celebration replace discord and friction. Finally, the General proclaims the good news of the gift that has been given to them all saying, "Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude. Grace makes no conditions and singles out none of us in particular; for grace takes us all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty. For mercy and truth have met together." Tears fill their eyes and merciful forgiveness fills their hearts. Hateful words are forgotten, and the invitation to the structure and foundations of the table transforms them into a community of love. And, as they overflow from that place, a sort of "upper room," their words of blessing replace their judgments, as they acknowledge their oneness together.

Be merciful as your Creator God is merciful – it is the gift that keeps on giving.