

“Merciful Justice”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
7th Sunday after the Epiphany – 23 & 24 February 2019
Luke 6:27-38

What Jesus taught, as chronicled by Luke, seems impractical, if not impossible, and it definitely feels unjust and even unwise. Take, for instance, turn the other cheek. Does this mean that people in abusive relationships must stay in them, forever accepting another slap, another cruel tirade that tears them down? What about thieves who steal your coat, or your identity? Does Jesus want us to do nothing, or to hand over our passwords when the hackers come knocking?

If we just sit and do nothing, wouldn’t we be doing a disservice to the abuser and the thief? People who do wicked things, but don’t suffer the consequences of their actions, tend to keep on sinning against God and neighbor. And why wouldn’t they? It’s all gain and no pain. Why repent and seek forgiveness and renew your life, when the complacency of your victims gives the impression that you’ve done nothing wrong? This road leads to chaos and anarchy. So how do we follow Jesus faithfully when he seems to sanction crime without resistance?

The easy answer is to claim that Jesus didn’t really mean it, that he just pointed to an unachievable ideal as a way to guide his disciples into righteousness. But nowhere does Jesus suggest that his comments are aspirational. His statements are not declarative, but imperative, without equivocation.

Another way out would be to look at what Jesus himself did. On several occasions he lashed out at his opponents, the people trying to stop his ministry. When the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the scribes attacked Jesus, he attacked back and made them look petty and foolish and selfish. Once, Jesus called them a den of vipers, an obvious allusion to the serpent in the

Garden of Eden, who led Adam and Eve and, therefore, all of humanity away from God. (We almost hear the crowd: Ooooooh! Buuuuuurrrrrrrn.) That's rough thing to say, but accurate, and afterwards, they left him alone to do God's work, at least for a while.

Jesus also violently cleansed the marketplace in the Temple, whip in hand, scattering livestock and overthrowing tables piled with coins. There's an old painting that vividly depicts the scene, and it's become a meme, with the caption, "When you're wondering "what would Jesus do?" remember that this is in the realm of possibility." It would be easy to say, "Well, that was Jesus, and we're not him," but if that's the case, how can Jesus serve as a role model for us to imitate?

Of course, undergirding everything Jesus said is love, the command to purge hatred, to refrain from judgment and not condemn, to forgive and be merciful as God is merciful. By his example on the cross, Jesus urges us to go beyond loving the people who love us back and to love our enemies, to give without thought for return, to pray for those whom we least want to pray for, those who couldn't care less and think that our prayers for them are silly. On the cross, Jesus prayed, "Forgive them, Father; for they do not know what they are doing." [Luke 23:24] None of his persecutors felt the slightest need for that forgiveness, but Jesus asked for it anyway.

When we act refrain from judgment, condemning, and vengeance, we receive mercy and forgiveness in return. We are neither judged nor condemned, but are given grace abundantly, "for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." Certainly, that helps compensate for the suffering we endure from those who harm us, and perhaps the whole point is that when we love unconditionally as God does, there is hope for transformation of the hateful, the violent, and those who steal. The hope that heals us can heal others. It acts as a witness to the wicked,

including us, that there's a better way to live, a more fulfilling way where all people can dwell in peace with God and one another.

However, the question of justice remains. If you get mugged, as I was at the age of 18, do you press charges and hold that person to account, or does forgiveness require that you do nothing and allow that person to potentially hurt someone else? If your rights are being trampled, if you've been taken advantage of, do you just sit and take it. That would just encourage the oppressor to strike again. Or can you take corrective action that is right in God's sight? Can you lovingly hold people to account without judgment or condemnation?

I believe we can, but we need to be very careful about why we do it and how. We can seek justice and be faithful if we purge vengeance and retaliation from our hearts. That can be extremely difficult, but grace gives us the strength to pursue justice in the right way.

First, we need to be keenly aware of our own sin, of how we have hurt others and how God and others have forgiven us. Accepting forgiveness is humbling. It forces us to realize that we've been in the wrong, too, so we cannot presume an attitude of superiority over another person, and it is that sense of superiority that distinguishes judgment and vengeance from the true desire to seek justice.

We need to remember that God's grace of forgiveness, offered both by Him and through others, has released us, not from the consequences of our actions, but from condemnation, and that as Christians we are both obliged and honored to share that same grace of forgiveness with others, even as we seek justice.

We also need to stay mindful of how it feels to be judged and condemned. It's a painful experience all of us have endured. Afflicting someone else with that pain will not decrease our

own, rather the opposite, because when we judge and condemn another person, they usually judge and condemn us back, and we bring God's judgment and condemnation upon us.

Remembering the pain of vengeance helps us empathize and connect with someone when we're tempted to seek vengeance. It helps us remember their humanity, that they are created in God's image, just as we are, that they are frail and flawed, just as we are. From our own wounds, the grace of healing can flow, as we hope for and work toward reconciliation, in the midst of seeking justice for ourselves and for all who suffer from repression, violence, and degradation.

Through the power of God's grace, the desire for vengeance and the temptation to judge and condemn can be overcome. Mercy and justice can coincide, in balance and harmony. We can pursue justice with peace, so that first can lead to the second. That is both practical and possible and necessary, and above all it is faithful and right and good. Amen.