

“Mercy! Mercy! Mercy!”

Sermon: Year C, Epiphany 7

Text: Luke 6:27–38, Genesis 45:3–11, 15

Preached: February 24, 2019 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Grace to you, and peace, from the God who forgives and is merciful. AMEN

You know, of all the words Jesus spoke, I think these may be some of the hardest to hear. Forgiving others, especially when they have done hurtful things that have had lasting consequences, is probably the most difficult thing we are commanded to do. Some of us spend more time cataloguing things than others, but I think most of us can reach back into memory, even long memory, and pull forward in our minds incidents of being hurt by others that still fester, even many long years later.

As some of you know, I was not here last month because I had to go down to Texas to be with my mother, JoAnn. She was diagnosed about five weeks ago with esophageal cancer, and I went down to be with her and to help get hospice care set up for her in her home. I will be going back down there this afternoon to spend a few days helping her tie up some final details, while she is still able to make decisions. That first trip, we really didn't do a lot of reminiscing. There were too many other things to attend to, and the news that her death will arrive shortly was the preeminent thing in her mind. There were so many details to take care of, just to get the house ready for her to come home from the hospital, interviews with caregivers, all of that. My niece came the following week and took care of sorting through things around the house, identifying all the belongings my mother wants each person to have, which was the most pressing thing occupying her mind.

Once that was taken care of, though, and as long hours of lying in bed begin to flow one into the other, there has been time to begin remembering, pondering, sorting through the things that are on her mind. We talk on the phone daily, and once we had talked through the scores of scriptures and hymns that she wants for her funeral (an 87 year-old woman who was a pastor's wife can have a hard time winnowing it down!), she began to talk about the people and the events in her life that had shaped her and molded who she was to become. There were fond memories of Sunday School teachers more than 80 years ago who had loved her and taught her to love God, and to live as Jesus taught us. There were kindnesses she remembered across the decades, friends who had been there for her in difficult times, like the two women who dressed in hula skirts and coconut bras to come dance for her once when she was in a depression. Those are beautiful things to remember. My mother's memory for these things is sharp as a tack.

But memory doesn't only store the beautiful and the good. Memory also stores the painful and the hurtful and the ugly. Last week, she recounted to me a story she had never shared before, an event that happened to her when she was 14, so some 73 years ago, three quarters of a century. She was on her way home from school. As she walked along the sidewalk, she noticed a car parked there, with a man standing on the passenger side, the door open. He called her over on some pretext, and being a polite child, she went. When she was within arm's reach, he grabbed her, held a gun to her head, and forced her into the car. As he sped away, they went past her house. My mother cried out that her house was there, and that she wanted out of the car. His response was to speed up. Summoning up her courage, she tugged on the door handle and jumped from the speeding car. Neighbors heard her screams and came to her aid, taking her home. That memory was seared into her brain. But it was the next thing that happened that I think in some ways had festered the most. When the neighbors brought her home, her father's response was that they should not call the police, because he didn't want people thinking his daughter might have been sexually assaulted. His fear of shame was greater than his urge to protect and defend.

Now, for as long as I can remember, my mother has been an anxious person. She never learned to drive. Every time she got in a car she nervously clutched the windowsill, and would demand that my father slow down. My young nephew could mimic her anxiety, much to the amusement of the adults who had been experiencing this behavior all of our lives. But it never occurred to us to ask ourselves where this had come from, what the origin of this was. Suddenly, as she recounted this story, it all made sense. The marks of how she had been sinned against had scarred her life, had saddled her with depression and anxiety, had even limited her mobility. And someone so close to her, someone who should have been her advocate and protector, chose instead to do nothing, because he wanted to avoid shame. That, I think, was a deep blow to a young girl, a blow that she silently had suffered from for 73 years. The effects of sin are long-lasting.

But now, though, at the end of her life on earth, she brought that memory to the fore, shared it, and I think is finally able to forgive, to let go of it. She told me that she would like me to include that in her funeral sermon. She said, “All these years, I’ve seen myself only as a victim. Maybe the #metoo talk lately has helped. But I see now that I was courageous. I did something courageous, and saved my life.” There is a great release for her in letting go of this memory, speaking it, and taking control, saying that the sin that was done to her, both by the abductor and by her father, no longer has dominion over her. She now has perspective on it, and sees that something good came from it, a realization that she is, in fact, a courageous person.

A little while ago, we heard a tantalizing snippet from the story of Joseph and his brothers that doesn’t have much impact if you don’t have the context of the full story. To refresh your memory, Joseph was the favorite child of Jacob, whom God renamed Israel, the patriarch whose twelve sons became the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel. Joseph’s brothers, out of jealousy because he was the favorite and a bit arrogant about that favored position, took him and beat him up, then sold him into slavery in Egypt. While a slave, Joseph was falsely accused by his mistress of sexual assault, and was thrown into prison. He was rescued by displaying an extraordinary gift of interpreting dreams. When Pharaoh has a dream that Joseph explains as predicting a terrible famine that will last seven years, Pharaoh decides to put Joseph in charge of organizing warehouses of grain that would allow Egypt to survive through the famine, and soon Joseph found himself in a position of great power and influence because of Pharaoh’s gratitude.

Meanwhile, the famine spread to Canaan, where Joseph had come from. His brothers, not knowing what had transpired for their brother, show up in Egypt trying to find food to take home to Canaan. They are presented to this powerful government official to make their humble request, but they do not recognize their brother Joseph—but he recognizes them. Eventually, he reveals himself to them, and they are terrified that he’s going to take retribution for the horrible thing that they did to him when he was a teen. Instead, Joseph is merciful to them, and forgives them, and embraces them with tears flowing. Joseph acknowledges aloud the great harm they have done to him, but instead of choosing vengeance—and he was powerful enough now that he held their lives in his hands—he discloses that he now has a different perspective on what they have done to him. He has come to understand that being sold into slavery had actually yielded a greater good. What was done for his harm has been transformed, redeemed.

I think that this may be part of what Jesus is getting at in the words recorded in Luke. If we hold onto our hurts, the sins that are committed against us, they fester and putrefy, robbing us of joy in the moment. Jesus tells us to take power over the sin, to forgive, to negate the power that those hurtful memories have over us. Turning the other cheek is not so much an act of submission as it is an act of power and defiance in the face of evil. When we pronounce forgiveness, when we are merciful, we are unleashing a power that allows the possibility that even our worst situations can be redeemed and transformed. Jesus demonstrates this even at the cross, where Luke reports that as he is being crucified, Jesus says, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Jesus knows the power of forgiveness. Good can come from evil. Now, this is not to glorify evil, nor to say that every evil act is changed into something beautiful and good, but it is to say that we ourselves can be transformed, and in learning to forgive, we transform the world around us.

Each of us is both sinner and saint. Each of us has both sinned, and been sinned against. Jesus calls us today to stand up to the power that those sins against us continue to hold over us, and by God’s power, to release the bonds of past sin. In doing so, we are doing exactly what God does for us, forgiving, showing mercy, and reconciling us to God’s own self. And in pronouncing forgiveness for others, by showing mercy, we come closer and closer to being fully who God has created us to be, and can find freedom and dominion over the powers of sin and death. In doing so, we will find blessing, and can redeem and transform even the worst of our situations. Mercy. Mercy. Always mercy. Thanks be to God. AMEN