

Kingdom of Mercy

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Texts Corinthians 3:1-9, Luke 6:27-38:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you Oh God our rock and redeemer. Amen.

This morning we pick back up with Jesus still in the middle of preaching his sermon on a level place or plain. In this series of verses Jesus begins to lay out a new way of living, of relating to one another, not in a kingdom of the world, but a kingdom of God in the world. And unlike so many times Jesus talks about the kingdom of God or heaven through metaphor, parable, or story, here, Jesus lays out a laundry list of actions that describe what it would look like for a community of people to make the kingdom of God visible on earth. As one commentator notes, as we approach Lent we might ask ourselves the question, why did they kill him and this sermon on the plain is one of the possible answers. We've heard many of these phrases before in popular culture if not in our childhood church school classrooms: "love your enemies, turn the other cheek, do to others as you would have them do to you." These phrases conjure up words like compassion, empathy, and service in our minds, but in the context of the cultural assumptions of Jesus' day these phrases were fiercely challenging the ways of the Roman Empire. The way Jesus pushes back against the systems, expectations, and power dynamics of the Roman world is dangerous for those in power at that time. Within the cultural context of Roman society, with each phrase Jesus is condemning violence, abuse, and having power over others in favor of establishing relationships grounded in God's mercy and love. Rachel Held Evans, an author who often speaks of faith through a modern lens says: "The kingdom of heaven advances not through power and might, but through missions of mercy, kindness, and humility...this is a kingdom whose savior arrives not on a warhorse but a donkey, not through triumph and conquest, but through death and resurrection. This kingdom is the only kingdom that will last." (*Inspired by Rachel Held Evans, 154*).

Jesus is not calling the people listening to him to be doormats or engage in unhealthy ways of relationship, rather he is calling them into a practice of non-violence, mercy, love and

service that promotes the humanity of those in need of it and upsets the current systems of violence, transaction, and dominance that pervade the foundation of Roman society.

Knowing this, my heart is heavy also knowing that this text has been used to keep women submissive to their abusers, to gaslight people with less power into thinking anger and disagreement is incompatible with recognizing someone's human dignity, doing the work opposite of what Jesus was advocating for. The interpretive history of these words has certainly been twisted enough to elicit valid discomfort among those who have been told that their submission to people who have power over them is holy. This is a whole other sermon, but I'd be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the harm done by the misinterpretation of these words. I'd be happy to grab coffee and talk to you more about it if you are interested.

We are not asked to tolerate what our enemies do to us, but to recognize their humanity in the face of what they have done. We are asked to embody the mercy of God, to imitate God's own character however imperfectly even as we set appropriate boundaries in dangerous situations. Jesus asks the people there on the level plain or as we talked about last week, perhaps this place of refuge, to call the world into a stance of radical love through these tangible behaviors. He calls us to be coworkers with God: to sow seeds of non-violence, of love that wishes wellbeing on everyone, even if they have done harm, of looking out for the wellness of the whole of the community that is striving together to embody God's mercy. This means acknowledging that even if you have the power to do something that it might not be the right thing to do. That it might not be the merciful thing to do. This work requires the buy-in of the whole community. As historic Congregationalists and Americans, we know that that is not an easy ask. Some of us might be feeling exhausted just thinking about it. Reading this list of actions might seem near impossible after experiencing and remembering the past two years of our own society. The lack of regard for each other's humanity amidst global crises one after another, stories of people punching retail workers in the face because they requested someone put on a mask in a shared space to love their neighbor, politics that harm and silence instead of uplift and nurture, leaders on the brink of war- all these things we have experienced and remember and are still experiencing. Even as we look towards something feeling more normal with tentative optimism, perhaps some of us have lost a piece of our trust in our world and the people in it, eroding our strength to stretch those Godly love muscles. Or perhaps it has motivated us all the more to love more loudly.

Our reality has done much to wear down our hope for a community committed to mutual mercy. Thankfully we don't have to do it alone.

In the early days of the church Paul understood that we do not have to find a way into these practices solely by ourselves, but we find a way into them in relationship with God and community. In our reading from 1st Corinthians, Paul emphasizes God's role in service of the church and God's kingdom. He says in regards to his and other early followers of Jesus' actions, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow." What strikes me in this metaphor of God and humans tending to the kingdom of God together is the immediate and particular nature of the work. It is both ordinary and miraculous at the same time. It feels possible because God makes it so.

Our actions however big or small that represent, and foster connection and mercy infuse the kingdom of heaven into our world with God's help. When approaching a piece of scripture one question I've often asked myself or conversation partners is this: "What's at stake here?" There is always more than one answer, but I think that one of the answers in the case of the sermon on the plain is whether the kingdom of God is going to be visible to people here and now. Will we experience a taste of heaven here on earth? Will we create it together with God's help? Or will it remain only something of our imaginations?

This morning we have ordained new deacons and celebrated them all. What a joy this has been. When I think about the work that our deacons have been called to the past two years it has been both immediate and particular, spiritually grounded and mercifully relational. It has reflected our congregation's efforts as a whole in making God's kingdom visible in this life. Through all the planning and pivoting this season of our life together has required, their service and all of our commitments to one another in this time has been a concrete reminder of the blessings of communal mercy and love. In particular, this past All Saints Sunday comes to mind when the deacons were trying to figure out how to serve communion outside on our lawn as well as for our 11 am service in the sanctuary. It was not even a question that our deacons wanted to offer communion to those gathered outside too. There was a lot of guessing of how much bread and juice was needed, how to get the trays out into the windy weather, but as the communion was informally served, God was there: all were fed, all had enough, all were able to experience the grace and mercy of the kingdom of heaven in the midst of community. These simple choices we make have meaningful impacts for what kind of world we create together

whether that is putting in the extra effort for a double communion Sunday, reaching out to a friend first after an argument, or choosing to see the humanity of someone being so steeped in fear that someone would turn to violence and yet hold them accountable in love.

As we have been in service of God's kingdom on our church lawn and in our sanctuary's pews, in our kitchens and on our couches, we have learned through our living that, as Paul so wisely states, "we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building." You are God's field, God's building, and perhaps your moments of mercy are your neighbor's place of refuge: from their discouragement from having hope for a merciful world, from their fear. May we practice having this hope emboldened and may we all exercise our Godly love muscles together for the co-creation of this kingdom Jesus so loved. Amen.

