

The Fourth Sunday after Trinity
9 July, Anno Domini 2017
St. Luke 6:36-42
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

You know the person well. The wound remains as fresh and as painful as when it was first inflicted. You've been hurt, badly hurt - maybe physically, maybe mentally, maybe emotionally, maybe all three. There is no one so evil as the one who has brought evil against you, the one who has stuck a knife in your back, the one who took advantage of your kindness, the one who dared to disagree with you, the one who sits on the other side of the political aisle, the one who abused you either sexually or physically or verbally, the one who hid in a parking garage with the express purpose of killing as many Dallas police officers as he possibly could. They deserve every ounce of wrath we can muster. They deserve to suffer even more than they have caused us to suffer. They are despicable human beings and should be condemned by man and God.

Certainly, justice demands punishment and retribution for such people. And nothing would make us happier than to see our persecutors get their just desserts. After all, isn't equity the highest virtue? "You do the crime, you do the time." It's only fair.

Unless, of course, the perpetrator is us. Then suddenly there is a higher virtue and a greater need - mercy. When we are the ones facing the ticket, the fine, prison, or the electric chair then we're suddenly not so interested in fair. When the Law's judgment of eternal damnation is ringing in our ears, then we hate the blind justice we demanded of others. Before the Ten Commandments there is no place to hide, no explanation that will mitigate the sentence - the eternal wrath of God suffered in the prison of hell. Then, there is only one fitting prayer - "Lord, have mercy upon me! Don't hold my sins against me. Look on me with eyes of pity and not justice. I know what I've done. My guilt terrifies me. Please don't give me what is deserved. I can't bear that punishment. Have mercy upon me!" This is the prayer of David in Psalm 6: "O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline in your wrath. Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled...I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with

my weeping. My eye wastes away because of grief; it grows weak because of all my foes.”

And, contrary to all reason, this is the most pleasing prayer to your heavenly Father. Not because he likes to watch you squirm or takes pleasure in your misery but because His heart is filled with mercy for sinners. He pities sheep who have foolishly followed their sinful desires and feel the poison of sin spreading through their conscience, consuming them with fear and grief. He doesn't want to see you dead. He delights in mercy. Nothing pleases Him more than to rescue you from death, to take your sins away from you. The Lord never takes pleasure in your sorrow or your suffering or your death. And He never judges you unworthy or ineligible for forgiveness. Judgment and condemnation are not the works that bring Him pleasure. They are His alien works, the works that justice demands and He will carry out them only if we refuse the work that brings Him joy, His proper work, showing mercy to sinners, forgiving you all that you have done. There is nothing more beautiful and pleasing to God than to see His beloved Son hanging on the cross paying the full debt of your sin, condemned as guilty in your place. He takes pleasure in that. He takes pleasure in your life!

Certainly, this mercy of God isn't something you have or even could merit. Your sin is not less odious to God than your neighbor's. It is a gift in the very purest sense of the word. You shouldn't receive it. The Law is clear in its expectation and in its light your failure to live up to those expectations is equally clear. That is the source of your disturbed conscience. That is the source of your unrest and discomfort. You're fooling no one but yourself if you think you can shield yourself from judgment by hiding behind the guilt of others.

And that is exactly what we are doing when we exploit the weaknesses of our neighbor, when we bring their errors and their failings into the light of day for everyone to look at and condemn. That isn't mercy. That isn't what your heavenly Father does. He doesn't glorify Himself at your expense. Exactly the opposite. He offers His Son for you, who humbles Himself to the point of death to cover the filth and ugliness of your biting words, your arrogant and vain posturing, your bitter desire for vengeance on your enemies, your gossiping, and your constant desire to be deemed better than the next person. He covers them all so that not even He Himself sees them. They are completely removed from His sight.

Repent. You have no need for grudges or vengeance or pride. Your heavenly Father has had mercy on you. He has looked in pity on your weakness and brokenness and used His power and majesty to elevate and glorify you. You owe Him nothing. You don't need to first impress Him and prove yourself. He loves to forgive and restore. He loves to pardon guilt. He loves to baptize young and old and make them part of His family and His kingdom of grace. He wants to fill you to overflowing with righteousness and peace and hope. He wants you to feast on His Holy Supper of forgiveness and life. He wants you to be free of the torment and oppression of your guilt. He does everything in His power to make you certain that there is no sin He holds against you and no good that He withholds from you.

The Church by definition is a people forgiven, a people who desire and delight in the abundant mercy of God. It is the whole content of all that she preaches and confesses. How can we then, who have tasted the freedom and peace of this mercy, refuse to share that same mercy and forgiveness with those who have wronged and sinned against us, with even our bitterest foes? How can we refuse to look with pity on those who are caught in their sins, whether they know it or not? How can we refuse forgiveness and undeserved mercy when it is sought, knowing how sweet it has been to our own tortured conscience? How can we lord people's weaknesses and faults against them when our Lord has done absolutely no such thing to us?

We can't. There is no room for mercilessness in the Church. To refuse pity and mercy and forgiveness is to deny what has been shown to you. Judge not because you have not been judged. Christ has. If you refuse forgiveness, you preach the devil's doctrine that Christ's blood was not shed for all the sins of all people - and that includes your own. If you refuse to forgive the Father's forgiveness will be taken from you. If you will not show mercy you will not know mercy.

If you are struggling to forgive, as all men do, pray that the Lord would soften your heart and teach you to forgive as completely and freely as He has forgiven you. Stare deeply into the pierced hands and feet of your Lord. They were pierced for you, for your sin. There is God's mercy for us who deserve to be judged and condemned. Learn the depth of God's mercy by tasting it in the Holy Communion at the table where Jesus joins

Himself to wretches like us. Whatever vengeance needs to be visited, God will visit. Pray fervently that no man would have to taste the vengeance of the Almighty God. Pray that they, like you, may taste, instead, His mercy and His forgiveness.

Your heavenly Father is filled with mercy and compassion for your neighbor just as He is for you. He desires the life of your neighbor just as He desires yours. Do not forsake these gifts by withholding them from others. Bless when you are persecuted. Rejoice in the strengths of your neighbor and mercifully cover his weaknesses. So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Let your love be deepest for those who deserve it the least, just as your Lord has done and continues to do for you.

In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.