

Epiphany 7C
Luke 6:27-38
February 19, 2017

Hear again a portion of today's gospel: *"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.²⁹ If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic.³⁰ Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.³⁵ But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

Have you ever heard a section of the Bible and then maybe quietly or maybe not so quietly find yourself wishing it hadn't been written like that? It might be that the words strike so close to home that it is scary. Perhaps what you hear goes completely against what is the prevailing thought of the day. Or it may be that the words hold up so high of a standard that it is impossible to reach. And just maybe the three lessons for today fit directly into those categories.

You have the account of Joseph...how he forgave his brothers. Consider the betrayal and bitterness, the hurt and hate. You have Paul's words to bless and love those who hate and hurt you, to live in harmony with everyone. So consider how reaching those words are. And then you have Jesus' words in the gospel to be merciful to all, to those who love you and those who hate you, to those who praise you and those who curse you, to those who give generously to you and those who take forcibly from you, to those who treat you well and those who horribly mistreat you. And then to top it all off, "Be merciful, just as your heavenly Father is merciful." Or to put it another way, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Or, "Be holy just as the Lord your God is holy."

Don't let your flesh try to fool you that Jesus is aiming and speaking these words at those really bad sinners out there who especially need to hear these words. These words are aimed squarely at you who have heard these words. You who have the Word of Christ, who have been called to be merciful, who have been made children of God. You who have the Holy Spirit, who have been given the mind of Christ...you who hear these words, they are for you.

And what is it that they reveal? Jesus' words quickly and clearly reveal that we have a big problem. And right of the bat, the problem isn't what we want it to be. The problem isn't with anyone else. The problem is with me.

We have been made children of God. We are sons of God. And we are commanded and expected to be holy and loving and merciful even as our heavenly Father is merciful. But the problem doesn't lie in God's command to love and be merciful and holy. My big problem and yours is that we aren't.

Yes, our problem even runs deeper than the truth that we don't always act and speak and think mercifully. There's a deeper reason why we struggle to forgive, why it's so hard to love our enemies, why loving ourselves is easier than loving others.

That deeper reason is unbelief. At the root of our struggle to be holy and loving and merciful is the truth that our sinful hearts don't believe that our heavenly Father is holy and loving and merciful. I know that we say it. But we don't believe it and the proof is in our actions. Our problem is idolatry, that is that we fear, love and trust other people and things rather than our heavenly Father. We believe what we see on the surface and trust what we feel rather than cling to the word and promise of God.

Want proof? We don't trust that our heavenly Father is holy in all that he does, including the way he guides and direct our lives so we sinfully demand and take from others what we think we should have. We have a lack of trust that it is the Lord to whom all are accountable and so we lash out at those who sin against us with our hurtful words. We don't trust God's promise to provide everything we need for body and life and so we hold back from giving to others. We don't trust that God's Word is everything we need and our greatest treasure, so we substitute the flavor of the day to satisfy. We believe that some of what God is doing is for our good, but all of it, every last bit of it, even the heartache and pain...come on. Our problem is that our unmerciful words and actions, our loveless thoughts and our unholy desires overflow from a sinful heart that is through and through idolatrous.

So you who hear these words, repent. Indeed repent of your merciless and loveless and unholy words and actions...but don't presume to stop there. Repent also of your unbelief. Of your sinful heart. Repent of your not fearing, loving and trusting in God above all things.

And then you who hear these words, hear also of the One who is truly merciful. The One who is truly kind. The One who is truly loving. The One who truly and completely is holy. The One who loves enemies like you so much that he willingly bleeds for them, cries out to the Father for their forgiveness, who dies for them. Hear the words of the One who offers his other cheek for his enemies to strike. Hear the words of the One who gives and gives and gives, freely and fully, unconditionally and undeservedly.

You who have heard these words of Jesus, recognize that the One who speaks these words is the One who fulfills them in your place. What you and I were powerless to do, when you and I were helpless to perform, Jesus stepped in your place to be merciful and loving and holy for you. Jesus came to earth and did exactly the opposite of what you have done and did exactly what the Father demanded. So you who hear these words of Jesus, listen to him again as he holds himself before you as the only solution to your problem. Hear him again as he reveals what kind of God and heavenly Father you have. Hear him again as he reveals that the Most High "is kind to the ungrateful and wicked."

God is right and true and serious when he says "be holy, be merciful." But not only does he demand it, he also provides it. Not only does he command it, he gives it. He freely counts as yours what Jesus has already done. And in doing so, he opens the door to be merciful even as he is merciful.

You who have heard these words of Jesus, you who have been baptized into the perfection and holiness and mercy of Jesus, you who are sons of the Heavenly Father have been given every reason to be like your heavenly Father. You who have received mercy, you are freed to go be merciful. You who have received forgiveness, you are unleashed to forgive, even along the lines of the example of Joseph. You who have been freely given the obedience and holiness of Christ, you are set apart to treat others like you would have them treat you, to speak to others as you would want to hear. Since you have been blessed in Jesus you bless those who persecute you. You rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. You who have not been repaid for your evil committed against your heavenly Father now seek to repay the evil others commit against you with good. In view of God's mercy to you and responding to it, you offer lives of willing sacrifice that strives to love others as you love yourself.

An amazing transformation takes place when you hear Jesus speak these words. You who have heard these words turn from something you wished you hadn't heard to something you love to hear. You who have heard these words have now heard the unconditional truth of the Lord Jesus, your heavenly Father is kind and merciful. Amen.