

February 24, 2019

Luke 6:27-38

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“Be Merciful as God is Merciful”

Who has heard the news about a new Samsung Galaxy phone? It is the coolest phone ever! It has two screens. One screen looks like a phone and then when you unfold it the screen becomes a tablet. What a nice feature: you have a phone to call someone really quick or text, and a tablet if you need to watch a video or look at the maps. It is sort of two-fold phone, meaning having two screens. As we reflect today on the words from Luke’s gospel from sixth chapter, the words that Jesus taught after he preached on the beatitudes and the woes, I can’t help but think of the how two-fold Jesus’ words are. But before we talk about that, I want to make a confession.

Every time I read or hear the words that Larry just read I feel slightly nauseated, confused, at a loss of words, and just want to throw my hands in the air. And maybe you are in the same boat. These words of commandments that Jesus taught the crowd are so overwhelming. He talks about so many things: non-violence, non-retaliation, forgiveness, non-judgement, generous giving, how to act with your enemies. Each of those items challenging us and creating more questions. Like the enemies? Who are they? Are they those who did not share their toy or candy with us? Or people who really hurt us in the past? Or those with whom we disagree, politically, socio-economically, or even theologically? How can we forgive someone who hurt our siblings or a friend? How can we respond with turning the other cheek if our society encourages us to respond back and fight back? Are we supposed to give to a person on the street when we are driving and stopped at the light even though this person may spend the money on drugs or alcohol? All these and more questions come to mind when we hear these words of Jesus. These words of Jesus as always go so deep that they touch the very depth of our souls, of course if we really listen. And Jesus says before he goes on to punch us right in the middle of our stomachs with his words, “But I say to you that listen.”

I do not know about you, but if I am really listening to these words, I feel like I am standing naked before God. Because I believe that these words make me and all who listen vulnerable. When I read these words I deeply understand how much I fail at all the items on the list that Jesus makes there. I also believe that all these issues and things that he talks about can stand separately but somehow Jesus puts these things together and on some sort of level, I get why. And I think because there is a two-fold nature to what Jesus says here. Jesus points not only to the ways we interact with others, our relationships, the work of forgiving others. But Jesus also points to our relationship with God and this part can be easily overlooked by the weight of all the things we are supposed to be for others. Somehow these words call us to be brutally honest about ourselves in God’s presence about our failures, mistakes, and choices we had to make and about God’s forgiveness and mercy for us.

On Wednesday, I spend my morning soaking myself in this passage, praying it over and over. Verse 36 kept coming back to me. Be merciful just as your Father is Merciful. As I was thinking about this verse I thought of how two-fold it is too. God is merciful to us and God calls us to be merciful. And I believe mercy might be just that thing that connects all of the things that Jesus talks about together. As I was reflecting and thinking about all this, this story from my childhood came to me.

I grew up in Russia and for two years of my childhood I went to a kindergarten, from age five to seven. Kindergartens were places where kids went from early morning until really late at night when their parents came from work to pick them up. I remember eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner there. I remember that every day we had to take those midday naps, beh...I remember even staying overnight there. When I was in kindergarten, we had something like an art gala that preschools have nowadays. Our preschool just had it. Kids draw pictures and then parents come, walk around adoring the images and then buy the images. Well, in the Soviet Union, our images were not for sale and there was not a gallery. It was this idea of bringing your art home and showing it to parents or caregivers so that they can adore the gifts and talents of their child. So I remember it was right before march 8th which is International women's day that we painted pictures of our moms. I was so excited. Painting was my favorite thing to do as a child. Who loves painting or drawing? Isn't one of the greatest things?! So, I loved and loved my mom. It was the best thing ever. As I was painting my mom's face, it looked so pretty and I was enjoying giving my mom bright red lips and beautiful long eyelashes, and I even drew a really pretty earrings on her ears. Closer to the end of our painting time, one of the teachers came to say hi to our teachers and she asked us what we were drawing, and we said our moms! And I was so excited to show how beautiful my mom was on my painting that I jumped on my chair and without any thinking lifted my drawing to show to this teacher. But because we used watercolors, and I used way too much water, because, in the process of me lifting the paper, all the paint started to leak. The teacher yelled at me to put the painting down but it was too late. My mom's pretty face had all these ugly lines on it. And I was sitting there in horrible disappointment and so angry at myself for what I did. It was almost the end of our time of drawing and at the end of the day my mom was supposed to pick me up and I was supposed to give her my painting. I started to cry. But one of my teachers came to me, calmed me down and quickly gave me a piece of paper and helped me draw another picture of my mom. It was not as good as the first one was. I was still disappointed. At night, when my mom came to pick me up I gave her the second drawing first. She thanked me and said how wonderful of drawing that was. But then I told her the whole story crying and showed her the first drawing that was spoiled. My mom told me that she could see a great job I did and how beautiful she was on that painting despite those markings and lines. And she gave me a big hug and a kiss.

I will remember this experience forever because I experienced mercy from my teacher and my mom as a young child in such a tender way. My mom and my teacher were able to tell me that I was more than this mistake that I made and they accepted me and loved me. But now as

I look back, I think of that spoiled picture, and how my mom was still able to see the beauty that I wanted to reflect. I think of God's mercy for us. Just like the lines and markings on that drawing, our mistakes, the choices we make or sometimes forced to make, regrets that we have can paint an ugly picture for the world to see. But because of Jesus' love for us, God sees us as God's beautiful and beloved children, despite those lines. God is able to embrace us as we are with those lines and markings, forgive us and offer us unfailing love over and over again in Christ Jesus. And God offers this mercy to everyone. And Just like God embraces those lines on the paintings of our lives, God is calling us to do the same with others.

What if God's mercy that we have experienced through Jesus can transform us into the people who embrace others with the lines and markings on the paintings of their lives? What if we can offer that gift of mercy, God's gift of acceptance and love to others? So God's mercy flow from our hearts to the hearts of others.

Then through this flow of mercy, we can offer forgiveness and forgive ourselves, not judge, give generously, and not respond to evil with evil. Look at the picture on the screen. Does it show the hands that are receiving or giving? It looks like both. It is two-fold. Isn't it? Could you please put your arms on your laps just like on the picture. It is the same pasture for us to be able to receive the gift of God's mercy and to give that same gift to others, to all. Our relationships with others and with God are interdependent. We need to be able to receive mercy to give mercy. It is a vulnerable position, a position to be open, to be honest and truthful not only with God but also with others, position of deep understanding of one's own need for God's mercy and acceptance and the need of others in our mercy for them. Jesus came to nourish our lives with mercy and love to live a new kind of life, a life of God's kingdom. Invitation is for us today to live a life fully and wholly. I invite you and me in the days to come to give ourselves to this flow of giving and receiving. May God's mercy flows to us and through us to others. Amen.