

4th Sunday after Trinity

Texts: Genesis 50:15-21; Rom 12:14-21; Luke 6:36-42

June 27, 2021

What If...?

I wonder how different our “Christian nation” would look/sound today if people simply heeded God’s Word. Probably quite different, to say the least. Just consider the three texts appointed for today’s meditation. How very different things would be if “*we the people*” actually put these words into practice. (That’s a statement of fact; not a question.) Consider the example that Joseph sets before us. He actually puts into practice everything that Paul speaks of in his epistle to the Romans. ***What if we were all like Joseph?*** Joseph had ***every right/reason*** to exact vengeance on his wicked brothers, who years earlier had beaten him up and sold him into slavery simply because they hated the fact that he was dad’s favorite. Oh, how the tables have now turned! Look who’s on top now, and it’s right when these wicked brothers need a HUGE favor too! Joseph could have brought down all kinds of wrath on these guys (and they deserved every bit of it and more, and no one would ever fault Joseph for doing so). ***BUT... he didn’t do it.*** In fact, he did just the **opposite**. Rather than seeking vengeance or reparations or pounds of flesh, he showed ***mercy***. “*Vengeance is MINE, ’ says the Lord.*” Or as Joseph himself puts it: “*Am I in the place of God?*” It’s God’s job to exact vengeance. Revenge is not part of the Christian vocabulary or the Christian life. Joseph didn’t give them what they so justly deserved. It wasn’t his place to do so. Instead, he showed them mercy. More than that, he showed them grace. ***He gave them everything they didn’t deserve.*** And he did all of this, not because he was a wimp or because the brothers won him over with their pathetically concocted tale about dad begging for their forgiveness from his deathbed. Nope. He did all this simply because that’s what God did for him. God showed sinful Joseph mercy/grace throughout his sinful life. Joseph, in turn, treated everyone else—even his wicked brothers—the same way his Lord treated him. ***What if we all behaved like faithful Joseph?***

Consider, also, Jesus’ own red-letter words about not judging others and not condemning others and first taking the hypocritical logs out of our own eyes before we start picking at the specks in the other person’s eye. What if “*we the people*” actually lived by these words, right? It’s at this point I will ***strongly*** caution you. You know as well as I do that when you pluck a few words or a few phrases out of context, **things go bad quickly**. Case in point: “Judge not.” We can quote those two words perfectly, especially when we’re feeling ***challenged or oppressed or demonized*** for our personal choices and behaviors. Everything else in this text tends to blurred out and muffled out. It’s like the rest of the words aren’t even there. “Judge not.” That’s all we hear/know. That’s all we need to know, right? More importantly, that’s all everyone else needs to know.

Folks: I know this may surprise some of you, but those words don’t mean what you think they do. They certainly don’t mean what most everyone else thinks

they do. *Those words do not mean that we are prohibited from distinguishing /judging between what is good and what is evil; between goodness and sinfulness.* So often today people say “You can’t judge me! You can’t tell me that my behavior is bad. How dare you! Judge not, lest ye be judged!” (It is amazing how EVERYONE can quote Scripture when it suits them, right?) Guys: This is **NOT** the meaning of this text. The Lord is referring here to a critical attitude, one that condemns/damns others, as if they have the authority to do so. Only God has this authority over the souls of men! Acting as if you’re holier than thou is not an attitude of gracious forgiveness and mercy, is it? “*Be merciful, just as/even as your Father is merciful.*” How often we forget that. How often we don’t even hear that part...even though they’re the FIRST words of the text! **Guys: That’s the whole key to understanding and making sense of this text!** Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

When there is a conflict between ourselves and others, what is our desire? Maybe that’s the wrong question. What *should* be our desire? What *ought to be* our desire? As a baptized, redeemed, and completely forgiven child of the heavenly Father, our desire should **NOT** be to run and tattle to the pastor. It should **NOT** be to punish the “grave offender” or make them suffer because they’ve made us suffer in some way, shape, or form. **Why?** Why does the Christian **NOT** desire the pound of flesh from his/her neighbor, even though they deserve it? Well...for starters the Christian knows and believes what God says about vengeance. “*Vengeance is Mine, so sayeth the Lord.*” There’s also the fact that the faithful Christian knows their own reality *corum Deo*; that is, before God. The Christian knows they’ve got plenty of skeletons their closet too (quite often the same skeletons that they’re so high-and-mighty about). The Christian knows that they’ve done bad and evil things against God, and He hasn’t ever dealt with us in this way; the *same way* that we dare to deal with others.

Think about that. Let that sink in. God, who is just and righteous and without sin, has **every right** to punish us and condemn us—on the spot—to eternal, hellish death and damnation. **But...that’s not how our God and Father deals with us, is it?** What does God do for us? Answer: He sent His only-begotten Son to perfectly fulfill the Law in our place—the perfect Law of God that we cannot and do not fulfill—suffering our justly-deserved punishment and death on the cross. He sent His only-begotten Son die and to be resurrected on the third day in order to gain eternal life for us. He was merciful to us; merciful to us through Christ and because of Christ.

“*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*” This same mercy that God has so unconditionally shown to us **must** be reflected in our lives. Yes, I said “**MUST.**” I know that sounds very law-oriented, but it’s not. I’m not saying that you **must** to do your part *in order to be saved*. No! **But...to not show mercy is to not be of the Father. It’s not Christian.** When the world sees you or hears you,

they should see and hear Christ. *Do they?* As a redeemed child of God—a child of mercy—when someone does wrong against us, our will and desire **MUST** be to forgive them, and if possible, restore a good relationship between them and us. *This does **NOT** mean that we shouldn't call sin "sin." We **MUST** treat others with humility, love and mercy (just like the Father treats us), *but we must also declare the Truth of God's Word.*

Indeed, this proclamation and confession of God's holy Truth—full Law and full Gospel—is all part of Christian love. It's love in action; God's love in action, in us and through us. I know our culture disagrees, but it is our God-given baptismal responsibility to confront others with their sins (SINS, not differences in preferences or differences of opinions), not to condemn them, *but to call them to repentance and salvation.* If your friend is heading towards a cliff, in what does love consist? If a friend or loved one is getting ready to dive into deceptively shallow, rock-filled water, in what does love consist? If you see a child wandering towards a busy street, in what does love consist? If the doctor knows it's cancer, in what does love consist? To not do or say anything? *We don't want to judge, do we?* No! Love warns of the danger! Well...the same goes for when a loved one (or even a complete stranger whom Christ loved enough to die for) walks in sin. Love says to that person, *"You are in danger. Turn around. Return to the Way of the Lord."*

Now, we must not be **hypocritical** in these cases. The Lord says, *"First remove the log from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck that is in your brother's eye."* We should not apply to others expectations that we do not apply to ourselves. *"Do as I say, but not as I do" NEVER works!* "You need to go to Church. I'm going golfing." Yeah...that's not going to work. We must seek the forgiveness of God for our own sins *before* declaring the Law to others. *Hypocrisy is a terrible teacher, but repentant faith in action can work miracles; miracles of repentance, life, and faith.* *"Learn from me. Don't do what I've done. Been there, done that. It doesn't work. It doesn't turn out well. Trust me. I love you enough to tell you the Truth. I'm not judging you. I'm loving you...just as I've been loved."*

And keep in mind here that all this talk of judgment and hypocrisy is not like a contract. It's not like if we don't judge others, then God won't judge us. Problem solved. No, no, no.... On the contrary, *because* of God's mercy to us, mercy is the fruit of the Holy Spirit that we bear in our daily lives. It's a very *natural, effortless* thing. Good fruit trees naturally bear good fruit, right? We've been engrafted to the Vine of Life that is Jesus. We've been engrafted to His cross; His tree of Life. The fruit that we, as baptized and redeemed children of grace, naturally bear is the cruciform, blood-stained fruit of Christ's unconditional love and mercy. Christian love—true Christian love—*wants* to help others in their

need and call the lost to the right path. Christian love gets it. We know the love shown to us. We know the hellish alternative.

“Be merciful, just as your heavenly Father is merciful”...to you. If there’s one thing you take away from today, I pray that this is it. If there’s one thing you want to focus on today, ***focus on God’s mercy and love to you.*** Focus on Christ; the very epitome of God’s mercy and love for you; God’s mercy and love for you in the flesh and in your very presence right here and right now. And when you depart this place today and make your way back out into this shadowy valley of sin, death, and despair, ***go forth in repentant joy.*** Don’t be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with the Good that is Christ and His mercy, His grace, His love, and His peace. Deal with one another and with all the other people God brings you into contact with ***in the love and mercy that God has so unconditionally and fully shown to you in Christ Jesus.***

What if...? Folks: The merciful love of God in Christ changes things. It changes hearts. It changes minds. It changes death to life. It changes tears of sorrow and fear to tears of joy and peace. By God’s grace, may this same Christ-centered merciful love change you. May it be witnessed in you, and never in spite of you. May this peace of Christ, which surpasses all human understanding, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Him. **AMEN**