

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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There is no easy way around it. Today's gospel reading is a tall order. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Or, to translate a bit differently from the Greek, "pray for those who insult or hurt you." Jesus' words are not standard practice in our world. Far too often, retribution, revenge, hatred, insult, rejection, intimidation, and the like seem to propel us further.

Perhaps it all originates from our reptilian or primal brain. That's the brain structure that controls our innate and automatic self-preserving behaviors. It's in charge of what neuroscientists call the four Fs: feeding, fighting, fleeing, and... well, reproduction (I won't use the last F in church). This reptilian brain of ours is primed and ready for fight or flight. To the reptilian brain, it's about personal and familial survival.

In recent years, the survival of the tribe that looks, thinks, and acts like me has had a resurgence in our society. We have fallen into divisive politics, we shout into social media echo chambers, and we care more about our personal survival than the subsistence of all. But today's gospel reading seems to indicate that this primal brain has always impacted humanity. After all, that's what Jesus argues in verses 32-34. He says that loving someone who loves you, doing good to someone who treats you well, and lending to those who will return it are all primal actions. It's built deep into us that we help, care for, and engage those who do the same to us,

but God's way gives mercy to those outside the in-group. God's way calls us to love our enemies, do good, and lend expecting nothing in return. God's way is summed up in verse 36, which says, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Or to translate it another way, "Be merciful, just as your loving God is merciful."

You see, Professor Ronald Allen reminds us that this reading presupposed situations of conflict. "Luke perceives many Jewish leaders and many Romans as hateful, even enemies. Instead of responding to various forms of threat with corresponding recrimination, [God's vision] calls for attitudes and actions that seek the good of the other." With this in mind, Luke's form of nonviolence goes beyond non-retaliation. Rather, "the disciples are to take positive steps that *promote* the welfare of the parties with whom the community is in conflict." So, in the end, the "golden rule" found Luke 6:31 has God's vision for the world as the implied reference point. That is, Jesus' followers are to relate to others according to the perspectives and actions aligned with God's vision for the world. Or, to put it another way, if you want to live in a world that has the qualities of mercy baked into it, then treat other people with mercy.<sup>i</sup>

Does this mean that there is no morality and that everyone can run around doing what they want without consequence for their action? Absolutely not. Rather, Jesus is taking a long view arguing that we should not act like we know the final verdict on anyone. After all, human perception is always finite. For, to be unforgiven and unforgiving is to be imprisoned by the lack of forgiveness. And to respond to violence with violence often increases violence.<sup>ii</sup> So, instead, we are

challenged to allow mercy to beget mercy. To be reminded that we have been given mercy and so we give mercy.

It reminds me of a 13-year-old girl named Lis. It was “sports day” at her school, and she was picked for the javelin team. When it was her turn to throw the javelin, she threw it as hard as she could. At first it was going straight but just at the last minute it veered off to the right. Well, one of Lis’s friends, Sammy, had volunteers to mark the pitch and had become distracted as the javelin was headed straight towards her. Then, in a moment of true horror, it struck Sammy’s head, and eventually, Sammy died. While it was determined that the school was responsible for this tragedy, 13-year-old Lis never heard that until years later. Even though Sammy’s parents never blamed her, Lis began internalizing everything. Over the years she began telling her story and then worked on her trauma using compassionate-focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Lis shared that her journey to healing started with self-forgiveness when she thought she had done something wrong. But then her journey brought her to another level as she came to understand that, in a way, there was nothing to forgive herself for. She wasn’t evil. She was a young girl, and the school was responsible for the children’s safety. So, her self-forgiveness finally turned into what Sammy’s parents had given Lis all along, compassion.<sup>iii</sup>

You see, whether it’s showing mercy to another or to ourselves, it’s mercy that births mercy. The takeaway from today’s reading is: “Be merciful, as your loving God is merciful.” Show mercy to others, especially those with whom you disagree. Be merciful to the democrats, republicans, and independents. Be merciful to the immigrants, the natives, and stateless. Be merciful to your friend, your foe, and yourself. Be merciful, as your loving God is merciful. For in giving and receiving mercy, the world in which we live will realize God’s vision of love and mercy. In

sharing mercy, we can be reminded that God has given us mercy. So, be merciful, as your loving God is merciful. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/seventh-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-luke-627-38>

<sup>ii</sup> I've continued following Professor Ronald Allen's thoughts here.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories-library/lis-cashin/>