



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. LINZI STAHLECKER, CURATE
FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JULY 10, 2022
AMOS 7:7-17; PSALM 82; COLOSSIANS 1:1-14; LUKE 10:25-37

MERCY

Luke 10:25-37 *[Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*

Mercy.

In today's gospel reading, we heard that a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.

We might imagine this lawyer as one of crowd of people gathered and jostling around Jesus. To locate us in the larger story: the seventy, recently sent out, have just returned, they are filled with joyful energy, we might imagine them bursting with enthusiasm and

excitement, wanting to share their news with Jesus and those around them. "Lord" they say "in your name, even the demons submit to us!" I imagine the astonishment, the celebration in some, the curiosity of others ... and in some of those people present, a building resentment, perhaps, at all the fuss and the rising celebrity of Jesus, which might come to eclipse their own positions, their own status within the community.

In the meantime, Jesus, responding to his friends' joy, rejoicing in the Holy Spirit, begins then to thank and praise God for all that has been revealed through him, he says, right before today's gospel reading "... no one knows who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

Jesus speaks these words amidst the crowd, and then the lawyer, that we hear about today, possibly needled by Jesus' self-assuredness and popularity, and possibly looking for a way to undermine Jesus in front of the gathered and energized crowd, bring him down a peg or two ... the lawyer stands up, "to test Jesus" in a very public way. After a brief back and forth, Jesus and the lawyer are in accord, they agree on the core and central belief, that love of God and love of neighbor is The Way to eternal life. But, not willing to abandon his chance to catch Jesus out, possibly score a point or two with the crowd, the lawyer follows up with a final question, he asks "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus, as we just heard, brilliantly answers that question with a story...

The parable Jesus shares centers on a key theological tenet, mercy. At the end of the parable, when the lawyer identifies the Samaritan as the one who was a neighbor to

the beaten traveler, describing him as "the one who showed him mercy," Jesus super simply and definitively puts an end to the lawyer's posturing, his testing, Jesus says to him, "Go and do likewise," Jesus tells the lawyer to go and show mercy. Had the lawyer appreciated the importance and centrality of mercy, and its very necessary role in our ability to rightly love our neighbor, he may not have engaged Jesus in quite the way he did.

Mercy. It's a remarkably common word in the Bible, and this offers some indication of its theological significance. Translations differ, but more or less, the Hebrew Scriptures mention mercy close to 300 times, and in the New Testament the word appears about 50 times.¹

Mercy.

The dictionary definition of mercy is, Compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is in within one's power to punish or harm. Compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is in within one's power to punish or harm.

Our gospel reading today seems to suggest the lawyer, with his very public tactic of testing Jesus, may have been short on mercy. And by using this parable, Jesus was able to

¹ Fr Harry Hagan, OSB, "Mercy's Many Meanings" *The Priest*, April 2022, 18-24.

bring the lawyer to name mercy as a core tenet, whilst also reinforcing the wider application of mercy and its absolute importance to anyone living intentionally in community and in covenantal relationship with God.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the source Scriptures for both the lawyer and for Jesus, the Hebrew word most frequently translated into English as mercy, is *ḥesed*. *Ḥesed* has a far fuller and more expansive definition than the one found for mercy in the English dictionary, in fact *ḥesed* is one of the most important words in the lexicon of the Hebrew Scriptures. *Ḥesed* is considered to be *the* word on which the theology of the Hebrew Scripture is built. *Ḥesed* : Mercy.

Ḥesed as mercy is understood as loving-kindness, it's steadfast love, it's grace, it's faithfulness, loyalty, it's devotion. When translated as mercy, all of these things are behind that one word, and all of them, really, are needed to understand the richness and fullness of mercy, of *ḥesed*. *Ḥesed* points to a personal involvement and a commitment to relationship beyond the rule of law, it evokes covenant, reciprocity, relationship. *Ḥesed* is used extensively throughout the Psalms, familiarly, I'm sure, in the repeating line of

Psalms 136, "his mercy endures for ever." It is the word used in Hosea, "For I desire mercy and not sacrifice" says the Lord, "the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." Also in the book of the prophet Micah where we are told what the Lord requires of us, that we are to "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God." Creation itself is said to be the result of God's *ḥesed*. Mercy, here, *ḥesed*, is an entire theological concept. And it is one that Jesus would have been fundamentally formed by and would have taught himself.

Mercy is also the English translation for the Hebrew word *raḥam*. This kind of mercy is visceral, *raḥam* shares its root with womb and bowels. This is the mercy experienced as a form of compassion. It is the kind of powerfully embodied response we might experience when confronted by the suffering of those who are close to us, or of those who are in obvious need of help. *Raḥam* is used often by the prophet Isaiah, it describes a mercy that flows from witnessing and feeling deeply the suffering of another.²

It is the Greek equivalent of this word, of *raḥam*, this form of mercy, that moved the Samaritan to step in and help the way they did. Our translation gives us the word "pity",

² Biblical Hebrew definitions and equivalencies drawn from *Strong's Concordance*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2010.

others use “compassion” – but the Greek word used in the New Testament text is the equivalent of *raḥam*. “A Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.” with *raḥam*. The literal translation of the Greek word here “to have the bowels yearn.” This is deep emotion. This is the embodied word Jesus uses in the telling of the parable.³

When Jesus asks the lawyer which of the three characters in the parable are neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers, the lawyer says, “the one who showed mercy.” The lawyer uses, here, the Greek word that evokes mercy as an aspect of relationship: on seeing one in need, the other responds to alleviate that need, or suffering. Mercy, here, is a binding, connecting force, a reality of being in relationship, in community, of taking care of one another.

It's the role of mercy in our love for one another, I believe, that's the primary teaching of today's gospel reading. If we are truly to love our neighbor, if our love is to magnify the merciful love of God in this world, then our love must also be infused with mercy, with *ḥesed*, with *raḥam*; this is the theological bedrock of the Hebrew Scriptures.

In the post-enlightenment cultural space we all share, the concept of mercy has been somewhat banished. This deep instinct of the human person that is so key in maintaining mutually life-giving relationships, with one another and with God, has been replaced by a rational self-sufficiency, indicative of the individualism that is so dominant today; the word mercy can feel anachronistic to our ears, and lacking in relevance. But mercy is *abundant* in our Bibles and in our Prayer Book, and given its theological importance, mercy warrants renewed attention, mercy calls to be understood and appreciated anew, to be cultivated.

Love and justice depend on mercy to be complete, to be life-giving.

And so, in order to rightly love our neighbor, and especially in order to love our enemies as Jesus calls us to do, we must embrace our capacity for mercy, ignite our instinct for mercy, in all its various forms. As we pray for God's mercy in our own lives, may we remember we too are called to love one another as God loves us ... with mercy.

³ New Testament Greek definitions and equivalencies drawn from *Strong's Concordance*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2010.