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The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

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St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Genesis 45:3-11, 15
1 Corinthians 15:35-38,42-50
Luke 6:27-38
Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42



Mercy. Mercy. Mercy. This could be a prayer, a plea, a dream, a commandment. I read the following introduction to this week's readings from a resource called "Sundays and Seasons." It said: "Mercy. Mercy. Mercy. Joseph lives it in Egypt. Jesus preaches it in the gospel. The Spirit guides us into merciful lives with the power of forgiveness to reconcile what is fractured and divided." Mercy. Mercy. Mercy.

Jesus' teachings today are difficult, there's no doubt about it. Immediately following what we heard last week, the blessings and woes with which Jesus began his Sermon on the Plain, he dives right into his next two points: loving your enemies and not judging others. Loving your enemies and not judging others. As the centerpiece of those points we hear a version of the famous Golden Rule: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, offer the other cheek, do not withhold even your shirt, give to everyone who begs from you, do not ask for things in return. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, do not condemn, forgive. Jesus' teachings today are beautiful and transformative, and they are so difficult.

Mercy. Mercy. Mercy. These teachings are certainly aspirational. No one could hope to do these things one hundred percent of the time. No one can actually accomplish being merciful just as God is merciful. God's mercy is perfect, ours will always fall short. But God will bring it to its fullness.

For us, mercy can still need boundaries. Sometimes forgiveness takes time. Reconciliation might not mean a return to exactly the way things were. Praying for those who abuse you and turning the other cheek doesn't mean endless self-sacrifice. In the end, it is only God who is perfect at being merciful.

It can be difficult to talk about these teachings in abstract. Let's look at the story of Joseph. A good deal of the book of Genesis deals with the story of Joseph and his family. They first appear in chapter 37 when Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebecca, settles in the land of Canaan. Joseph was the favorite son, and all his eleven brothers hated him and could not speak peaceably to him, we are told. To make a long story short, things go downhill quickly for Joseph. He's a dreamer, and his dreams upset his entire family. They plot to throw Joseph into a pit and pretend that he'd been killed by a goat. After throwing him into the pit, they instead sell him to a caravan of Midianites who sell him into slavery in Egypt. Eventually, Joseph becomes second in command only to Pharaoh.

There is a great famine and as it turns out, his brothers end up before him begging for grain. They don't recognize him, but

he recognizes them. And eventually, after some back and forth, he forgives them. Through God's grace, he finds the strength to show mercy after the jealousy, hatred, and violence inflicted on him by his own brothers. At the end of Genesis, we hear Joseph comment that what they, his brothers, intended for harm, God used for good.

That can be one way to forgive. To recognize that it is not God that wills evil or misfortune, but that God is able to use even the things that we intend for harm and bring something good out of it, bring reconciliation.

Alphonetta Wines who is a pastor and theologian in Texas highlights four lessons we can learn about mercy from Joseph. First, the understanding that reconciliation is possible even when it seems most difficult. Has anyone here even been thrown into a pit by their eleven brothers, left to die, sold into slavery, and ignored for years, only to be appreciated and sought out again once they were rich and could help said family? Didn't think so. The point is, we all face real pain, real hurt, real fractures in our lives with friends, family, colleagues. But even when it seems most difficult or most unimaginable, God, with time, is able to bring reconciliation.

The second lesson is that mercy and forgiveness require facing and telling the truth. You can't pretend it didn't happen and simply move on, and you can't underestimate the pain that might have been caused you or that another might have experienced. You have to talk about it. You have to face the truth in order to show mercy, not sweep it under the rug.

And third, reconciliation requires action. After forgiveness comes the hard question of what are you going to do about it? Are you going to live differently because of the mercy that has been shown to you? Are you going to live differently in relation to another person because of the mercy you've shown them? Or will you say I forgive you and that not live as if anything has changed? Mercy requires action.

And finally, mercy requires trust in God to be at work. It requires trust in God not as the source of evil, which is the absence of God, but God as a reconciling force. It requires trust that what human beings might intend for harm or evil, God is able to use for good. It is trust that even though are mercy might not be perfect, God's is perfect.

For Joseph, forgiveness didn't happen overnight. It wasn't easy, it wasn't a passive acceptance, and it wasn't possible without God's help. It was a long process, years, and it required all involved naming and facing the truth. It required them making changes in how they lived, and above all it required faith

in God's mercy to take the lead.

The particulars of all our stories are different but the need for reconciliation is the same.

I revisited the other day an NPR StoryCorps interview with the mother of Charlie Roberts talking about forgiveness.

In 2006, a Charlie Roberts barricaded himself inside the West Nickel Mines school in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He killed five students and injured another five before taking his own life.

"The Amish community responded in a way that many found surprising: They forgave the shooter. And, in the years since, they have grown close to his family."

"That week, the Robertses had a private funeral for their son, but as they went to the gravesite, they saw as many as 40 Amish start coming out from around the side of the graveyard, surrounding them like a crescent.

"Love just emanated from them," [Charlie's mom] says. "I do recall the fathers saying, 'I believe that I have forgiven,' but there are some days when I question that."

"And their choice to allow life to move forward was quite a healing balm for us," she says."

Forgiveness changes us. Forgiveness changes everyone involved. It brings healing. There are times when one might question if they are strong enough to really do what is required, but God supplies us with God's endless mercy.

Forgiveness is difficult, no sugar-coating this morning. It requires facing and telling the truth, about the past, the present, and continued challenges and opportunities for the future. It requires action. And it requires trust in God. Acknowledgement that even from a painful and divisive past and present, God is able to make a future that is very, very good.

The prophet Micah tells us that this is what required of us: to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. Love mercy. Mercy, mercy, mercy. In writing about this text, even Rabbis of old recognized how difficult this is. And they wrote: "We are not obligated to complete this work, but neither are we free to abandon it." Just because mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation, might be difficult, doesn't mean that we are free to abandon the work. It means we have to trust that much more in God's power to work within us and through us to bring healing to the world.

Where do you see the need for reconciliation in the world? Forgiveness? Mercy? This is the work Jesus calls us to today. It is difficult work, ongoing work, but it is the work that heals and transforms the world, bit by bit.