

## Mercy

Matthew 5: 1-12

[Augsburg College Chapel, 27 January 2017]

*“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy...”* (Matthew 5: 7)

A year ago last summer, I had the privilege to visit the Holy Land and to stand at the crest of the hill - the mount – where Jesus is reported to have delivered his first major sermon – the words we have just heard. As I stood there my thoughts turned to how these now familiar words to us would have been heard by the Jewish throng gathered to hear from this young rabbi. Surely for those raised to follow the law, these words from Jesus were radical, heretical even, turning righteousness on its head. Jesus challenges these people of faith to pivot into this very disruptive vision of life in the world. And here, 20 centuries later, we hear these words again, and how will we people of faith respond to the disruption that is the life of discipleship? Disruptive discipleship - so urgently needed in our unsettled times.

As a theological ethicist, I have long found great intrigue in these so-called Beatitudes as found in the Gospel of Matthew. As the American novelist Mary Gordon has written in reflection on the Sermon on the Mount: “To say yes: for this I will try and change my life. And more: without this I would not know who I am.”<sup>i</sup> In other words, the Beatitudes offer not simply rules for a good life; they are a way of describing who I am, who I am called to be. And, as Gordon further suggests, who I am and who I am called to be by the Beatitudes is very much tied to the sort of world Jesus intends for his followers to create – “a world that is safer and more generous.”<sup>ii</sup> A world that is safer and more generous, a disruptive vision indeed...

This morning, I want to focus on just one verse from the 12 we have heard: Matthew 5: 7, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy,” I am struck by the fact that of the nine Beatitudes in Matthew, verse seven is the only one where you receive the same as you give. Being merciful begets mercy. If you’re poor in spirit, you get the kingdom. If you mourn, you are comforted. If you’re meek, you inherit the earth. But if you’re merciful, it’s right back at you. I suppose we could be a bit disappointed by that equation – it doesn’t seem quite fair given some of the other returns. Instead of being disappointed, though, I want to suggest that this is actually the beatitude that best defines what it means to live as faithful people in the world. The mutual dynamic of giving and receiving mercy are at the heart of the called life that we enjoy as people of God, the body of Christ, here and now in the midst of this neighborhood, city and world. To give and receive mercy are what it means to live our vocations in God’s world. Mercy is at the heart of disruptive discipleship.

There is precedent for this claim about giving and receiving mercy. Religious historian Martin Marty was once asked what the distinctive mark of the Lutheran church is, to which he replied, simply, “Acts of mercy.”<sup>iii</sup> Martin Luther himself used the word “neighbor” more than many other important Lutheran words in his voluminous writings and made giving and receiving

mercy a hallmark of his ethics.<sup>iv</sup> There is clear evidence that this commitment to giving and receiving mercy is a hallmark of Lutheran Christians over the past 500 years – witness our legacies of educational, health care and social service institutions, not to mention the abiding hospitality and service offered by Lutheran individuals and congregations around the world.<sup>v</sup>

We might have reason to pause here, however, for those who know anything about what Lutherans claim about being justified by faith alone, you might think that our Lutheran Martins are missing something. Why this talk about mercy and neighbor when the central theological claim of our tradition is that we can't earn our salvation – good works don't merit redemption? But the fact is that it is precisely because we can't earn it that we have been freed to live as merciful people in the world, knowing that mercy begets mercy. That is the foundation of healthy and just and faithful lives together in the world. God is in charge, God has a plan, and God's plan is that faithful people will care for the earth and for each other with mutual mercy. God calls us to serve God's world.

Theologically, Luther said it this way in his treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian* (as translated by our own Professor Mark Tranvik): "From faith there flows a love and joy in the Lord. From love there proceeds a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves the neighbor and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss."<sup>vi</sup> In other words, for Luther, our faith itself calls us out of ourselves and into love of the world, where what we know and do are always about serving our neighbor without account of our own standing. We give and receive mercy.

I am of the opinion that this simple verse from Matthew could be Augsburg's motto because we do most certainly know what it means to give and receive mercy – to live our vocations in and for God's world.

Furthermore, guided as well by the wise words of the social reformer, Jane Addams, we believe that democratic engagement on campus and in the world is about the mutuality of citizens, fellow travelers on the road, willing to be neighbor, to understand each other's burdens and aspirations, to seek common purpose across our remarkable diversity. Disruptive discipleship.

Mercy is the hospitality and pursuit of justice that the Augsburg community practices with neighbors, strangers, students and each other. I am struck every day by the number of different ways members of the Augsburg community offer hospitality. From the diverse students, faculty and staff who find a home at Augsburg, to the faculty and staff who go out of their way to ensure that students have what they need to succeed, to the diverse neighbors who are welcomed on our campus to engage in important conversations for our neighborhood and world, to the remarkable ways in which Augsburg graduates are practicing hospitality in their own lives, and I could go on and on. It's certainly in the specifics of how we practice hospitality, but it's also in the attitude and spirit we bring to what it means to be a welcoming community. And genuine hospitality offers mercy so that it might know the mercy that comes from engagement with others. We welcome so that we might get to know each other, to learn

from each other, to work together to make the world more hospitable and just. It's about mutuality, about giving and receiving mercy.

Mercy also is the sort of educational experience we aspire to offer our students. I hear from so many of our students about the relationships they gain here with fellow students, with faculty members and with those in the neighborhood and city who share their educational journeys. It is a hallmark of this place, I believe, to see education itself as a relationship that is marked by its giving and receiving. Parker Palmer has written of the central role of love – in both teaching and learning.<sup>vii</sup> A teacher loves his/her students – offers mercy – and the students return that love in engagement, questioning, growing in understanding and going out to share what they have learned with others. The poet William Wordsworth has written these words, which are my own creed as an educator, “What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how.”<sup>viii</sup> That is a description of what happens on this campus each and every day as we engage each other as fellow teachers and learners, hungry for knowledge and skills and perspectives so that we might share what we learn with others. It's about giving and receiving and serving God's world.

And mercy is faith in action, the passion to do good not for any recognition or reward but because God calls us to love the world. As our good Regent colleague David Tiede once reminded us, “John 3:16 doesn't say ‘for God so loved the church or the college’, it says ‘for God so loved the world!’” And that makes all the difference for discipleship. Our institutional calling: *We believe we are called to serve our neighbor*, makes the claim that faith, learning and service can never be separated because God intends that what we believe (the gift of faith), calls us to be educated (the privilege of an education), so that we might be of service (the obligation of making the world better for all God's people). I have the privilege to learn about and witness the work of our students, faculty and staff who are practicing mercy – both the giving and receiving of mercy – in the chapel, in the residence halls, in the classrooms, on playing fields, in the neighborhood and around the world. I love to brag about so many of our “faith in action” programs - , e.g., Campus Kitchen, led by our students, which prepares and shares food in the neighborhood, grows food in our community garden and buys food at our weekly Farmer's Market, and now shares our bounty with fellow members of our community who otherwise go hungry. It's all good work – it's merciful work – but it's not simply one-way service. Beth Florence, who graduated several years ago, once told me that preparing and delivering meals was OK but not good enough for her, she needed and wanted to sit with the recipients of the meals, break bread together, and get to know each others' stories. She wanted food to be the occasion for giving and receiving mercy. Faith in action through learning and service for our neighbor and God's world.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Disruptive discipleship. Democratic engagement. What abundant gifts we have been given from our gracious God – gifts of hospitality, education and faith active in love. Gifts of wise and faithful leaders whose legacy guides our abiding commitment to educating students for vocations that serve God's world. For these many gifts – in this, our 148th academic year at Augsburg – we proclaim for all the world to hear: Thanks be to God! Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Gordon, Mary. *Reading Jesus: A Writer's Encounter with the Gospels*. New York: Pantheon Books. 2009, p. 87.

<sup>ii</sup> Op cit., p. 84.

<sup>iii</sup> Marty, Martin E. Personal correspondence.

<sup>iv</sup> Luther, Martin. *Works*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing. 1955. A search of the on-line version of Luther's Works (in English) shows that neighbor (or similar words) appears some 2200 times, more than justification or faith, though far behind righteousness (5700). On Luther's ethics, see Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1972.

<sup>v</sup> As quoted from Gracia Grindal in *The Promise of Augsburg College*. DVD media. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg College, 2008.

<sup>vi</sup> Luther, Martin. *The Freedom of a Christian*. Translated by Mark D. Tranvik. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. 2008, p. 83.

<sup>vii</sup> Palmer, Parker. *To Know As We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco. 1983, p. 16.

<sup>viii</sup> Wordsworth, William. From *The Prelude*, Book Fourteenth. Public domain. 1888.