

Paths of mercy

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

(Augsburg University Chapel, 1/27/23)

A few years ago, I had the remarkable opportunity to be in Israel, exploring partnerships with Israeli and Palestinian organizations. While there, one of my most memorable experiences was the trip to the shores of the Sea of Galilee, where the intersections of the Biblical narrative with that historic place are visible and deeply moving. One such place was the amphitheater-like hillside overlooking the Sea where it is believed that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount. This morning, I am transported back to that hillside to consider how Jesus instructed all of us about what it means to be blessed.

As a theological ethicist, I have long found great inspiration in the Beatitudes as found in the Gospel of Matthew. As the American novelist Mary Gordon has written in reflection on the Beatitudes: “To say yes: for this I will try and change my life. And more: without this I would not know who I am.”ⁱ 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.”ⁱⁱ

I am especially struck by the passage from Matthew 5: 7, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy,” I was intrigued to find 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.

There is precedent for this claim about giving and receiving mercy. My teacher, religious historian Martin Marty was once asked what the distinctive mark of the Lutheran church is, to which he replied, simply, “Acts of mercy.”ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Luther himself used the word “neighbor” more than many other important Lutheran words (like faith and grace and scripture) in his voluminous writings and made giving and receiving mercy a hallmark of his ethics.^{iv} There is clear evidence that this commitment to giving and receiving mercy is a hallmark of Lutheran Christians – 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.^v

We might have reason to pause here, however, for those who know anything about what Lutherans claim about being justified by faith alone through faith, 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 Emeritus 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."^{vi} 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 seek out what I call "paths of mercy" – to live our vocations in and for God's world.

Mercy is the way that the Augsburg community offers the gift of belonging to its neighbors, strangers, students and each other. I am struck every day by the number of different ways members of the Augsburg community offer the gift of belonging. From the diverse students, faculty and staff who find a home at Augsburg, to the move-in ritual we have for first year students coming to campus to live in the residence halls, 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 belonging offers mercy so that it might know the mercy that comes from engagement with others. If it was just about welcoming folks well, then we might as well be a hotel. But if it's belonging so that I might get to know you, to learn from you, to work with you to make the world more hospitable, then it's about mutuality, about giving and receiving mercy. It's a path of mercy that defines our lives in this community.

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.^{vii} 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.”^{viii} 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. Teaching and learning in this community place us on paths of mercy.

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. Our institutional calling, which we articulate this way: *We believe we are called to be 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 our Campus Kitchen program, led by our students, which prepares and shares food in the neighborhood and grows food in our community garden, and makes food available to our students at the Campus Cupboard. 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. Paths of mercy.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. What abundant gifts we have been given from our gracious God – gifts of hospitality, education and faith active in love. Paths of mercy that mark our lives together in community. For these many gifts – in this, our 153rd academic year at Augsburg – and for all the ways in which this beloved community witnesses to those gifts each and every day - we proclaim for all the world to hear: Thanks be to God! Amen.

ⁱ Gordon, Mary. *Reading Jesus: A Writer’s Encounter with the Gospels*. New York: Pantheon Books. 2009, p. 87.

ⁱⁱ Op cit., p. 84.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marty, Martin E. Personal correspondence.

^{iv} 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.

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

^{vi} Luther, Martin. *The Freedom of a Christian*. Translated by Mark D. Tranvik. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. 2008, p. 83.

^{vii} Palmer, Parker. *To Know As We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco. 1983, p. 16.

