

Life Abundant
Luke 6: 27 – 38

Anne Kleinkopf
June 27, 2010

Sometimes, a small event can change the way we experience the world. It can alter the basic framework in which we understand and live our lives. This was one such event for me:

As many of you know, I am a student at Iliff School of Theology. Several years ago, I took a class with a visiting professor, Gary Dorrien. Gary is a remarkable person. He is a prominent liberal theologian and a passionate social and political activist. He was also a widower and a single parent, raising his teenage daughter alone after the premature death of his wife from cancer.

One class period with Gary developed into an intense discussion on the effects of sin in human life. The class talked about how even the best-intentioned efforts at changing structures of oppression and exploitation can be stymied by fear, pride, selfishness, and misunderstanding. It was pretty discouraging. Finally, I raised my hand and asked, “So, in the middle of all that, how do we keep going? What’s to keep us from just giving up?” Gary looked at me and looked around the room, and smiled. And he said: “Love. Love is *why* we keep going, and love is *how* we keep going.” And then he went on, “Let me tell you all a story. Some time ago, I attended a meeting led by William Sloane Coffin, Jr. It was a meeting of peace activists, some of them from secular and some of them from religious backgrounds. The peace movement had recently met with some serious setbacks, and someone in our gathering asked Bill Coffin that same question: “how do we keep going?” Bill replied, “Well, I’m going to give you an answer that’s gonna make some of you unhappy. But in this sort of work, religious folks have an advantage. When we are ready to give up, when our own personal resources are exhausted, those who are grounded in God have other resources to call upon -- resources of hope and love that come to us from beyond our limited selves. We can keep going because we live out of those wellsprings of love.”

Love is why we keep going, and love is how we keep going. That, I think, is the profound and life-giving lesson that Jesus was giving to his followers in our scripture lesson today. Jesus is offering his followers – is offering *us* – a vision of a new world, a new way of living together. He is also challenging them, and us, to live into that vision; and he is holding out to them, and to us, the resources needed to accomplish that vision. And it all turns on love. And not the mooshy, syrupy Hallmark Cards variety of love; but rather the active and compassionate, live-giving and life-changing, open and courageous variety of love that the Gospel of Luke calls “mercy”. We are called to be merciful just as God is merciful.

What is this “mercy”? Well, it’s not “pity,” as in “oh, you poor thing!” – because that sort of pity actually separates us from other people, because it makes us feel superior to other people. Nor is it the forgiveness of “us terrible sinners” – although, as you’ll see in a bit, forgiveness does have something to do with it.

The first element of mercy is compassion. Compassion comes from a heart and a mind open to the full humanity of the other person. Compassion looks into the face of the other and sees, not an enemy, not an opportunity for gain, not a person who has hurt me, not an undeserving jerk, but a suffering and vulnerable fellow human being – a human being who is

loved by God, and who carries a spark of the divine within them -- a human being just like me, who calls out for my love.

But mercy is also more than this, more than just an internal feeling that I can keep to myself and feel good about having. Mercy also includes a crucial element of *action*, of active care for the other. And the care that mercy demands and gives is not just a superficial, Band-Aid care, but is a care that comes from and reaches out to the very core of life. It is care that carries the potential to transform both the giver and the receiver, and even if just for a moment, to alter the very structure of the world around them.

We can get a fuller sense of what mercy really means by looking at the other places in the Gospel of Luke where mercy plays a central role. When the ten lepers come to Jesus, for example, they cry out, “Jesus, have mercy on us!” [Luke 17: 13] And Jesus’ healing mercy restores them to physical health, but also to much more than that: merciful healing restores them to personal wholeness and to a productive, loving life within the community from which they had been exiled because of their leprosy. And “mercy” is also the word used by Luke to celebrate the effects of divine justice, which subverts human structures of oppression and inequality; mercy brings down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty. [Luke 1: 50-53] “Mercy” also describes the unexpected pregnancy of the aging and barren Elizabeth: mercy brings life where life had seemed to be humanly impossible. [Luke 1:57] And “mercy” is what the Good Samaritan enacted when he saw a man dying by the side of the road. The Samaritan put aside his prejudices, which told him that this dying Israelite was an enemy of his people; and he put aside his religious principles, which told him that to touch a dead body would make him unclean; and in mercy, he reached out for and embraced an enemy-stranger, whom he saw only as a suffering fellow human being; and he took charge of the dying man, and made sure that he was restored to health.

All of these acts of mercy are life-giving and life-changing events. Acts of mercy transform the lives of those who give mercy, because the merciful throw off the chains and burst the enclosures of their own prejudices, their own confining principles, and their own past experiences; in being merciful, we open ourselves in compassion and care to our fellow human beings, and in so doing, we grow into our own fullest humanity. Acts of mercy also transform the lives of those who receive them: mercy actively acknowledges the worth, the inestimable value, of each human life, and gives to those who receive mercy the love, the forgiveness and the healing which enable them to be restored to new life and to their own fullest humanity. And acts of mercy also transform, at least for a time, the very structures of the world in which we live. Because in the moment of mercy, the moment when real mercy becomes incarnated in our lives, even if only briefly – in that moment, we throw over all structures of oppression and exploitation that rule our lives, and replace them with relationships of love and of active care.

And that understanding of mercy helps us to better understand the strange and even disturbing examples of mercy that Jesus offers in this passage: bless those who curse you, give to those who steal from you, make yourself vulnerable again to those who have hurt you. What Jesus is demanding of us here is that we see each of these situations through the eyes of mercy, and respond to them with a heart of mercy, with the hope and expectation that mercy incarnated will transform the giver, the receiver and the structures of relationship in which we find ourselves. In challenging us to turn the other cheek to a person who has hurt us, Jesus is challenging us not to allow hurt and resentment, anger and victimhood to be the governing forces in our lives. Rather, he insists, look upon the other with compassion, and see the human being

standing before you – the human being who has probably acted out of their own hurt and fear, the human being who bears the spark of the divine somewhere within them. Turn to *that* human being in openness, in vulnerability and in forgiveness; and in mercy, offer them the space, the support and the opportunity to act, not out of anger and hurt, but out of their own deepest and blessed humanity. And turn also to the one who has taken from you, and see, not a thief, but a fellow human being who is desperate with need; respond in mercy not to their aggression, but to their need, and offer them in compassion the clothes that they lack to keep warm and dry. And when someone curses you or hates you, do not let their anger and hate frame the relationship between you or drive your response; rather, in mercy, step outside of the framework of hatred and retribution, open your heart to the human being before you, and reframe the relationship between you as one of understanding, compassion and care; and then act toward them in mercy out of that framework.

In each of these examples, and in each of the moments of our lives, we are challenged to take a situation of oppression or exploitation, of anger, hurt or fear, and in mercy to transform it into a relationship grounded in compassion, forgiveness and active loving care for the other.

The question that immediately arises, of course, is: “Isn’t that really hard to do? Both for the giver and for the receiver of mercy?” And the answer is yes, if we rely only on our own poor and limited personal resources, incarnating mercy can indeed be very difficult.

But God never issues a challenge without providing us with the resources that will empower us to meet that challenge. And what God give us so that we may be merciful is God’s own life-giving mercy. What God gives us is indeed God’s own life, flowing into and shaping and empowering our lives. For the abundance and power of mercy are not just attributes of God; overflowing and life-giving mercy is itself the very life and being of God.

What Jesus is asking – what Jesus is promising -- is that, if we just open our hands and our hearts to the mystery of love that we call God, we will receive the mercy that we seek and so desperately need. And we will receive in abundance, all and more than we need, good measure, running over. If we put aside our prejudices and our good rational principles, if we put aside our hard life experiences which tell us that all resources are limited and that all love has to be earned -- if we open our hearts even just a crack – we will find that what flows in is life-giving and life-changing mercy. And if we continue to be open to this wild possibility of abundant life, we will find that mercy continues to flow into our hearts and lives, and overflow out of our hearts and lives to others.

And that is the vision and the incarnate reality of the new life, the life abundant, that Jesus is offering to his followers and to us. Does that mean that life will suddenly be easy? Does it mean that evil and hatred and oppression will disappear? No, unfortunately, it doesn’t. But it does mean that, even in the midst of hatred and anger and oppression, we are given the resources to create personal lives and a life together in community that will be richer and deeper, more life-giving and life-enhancing, more loving and more abundant than any life we can imagine or create by ourselves.

And the sharing of that life, that love, that mercy, with one another is why we live; and God’s sharing of the life-giving power of mercy with us, is how we live.

May it ever be so,

Amen