

THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER

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MERCY

as strategy and purpose

by Drew Downs

Mercy is good. We're supposed to want to be merciful. And we also know we aren't always keen to offer it. It's that amazing thing we all know we're supposed to want to show and it is also so predictably hard to do.

For thousands of years, people of faith have not only been taught to be merciful, but to do it willingly, joyfully, and constantly. So the question is obvious: why is it so hard for us? If it is at the heart of faith, why the struggle?

Perhaps it is too easy to overlook the obvious. That our cultures are all oriented the other way. Toward revenge. And with it, escalation. Essentially, we're taught to distrust and reject. And this gives us an essential way in.

It isn't that revenge is natural. But it is what our cultures have developed as a starting point. Mercy, then, isn't a goal—it's a strategy. A way of being, a purpose for life, that allows us to live a more generous life together.

ORDINARY TIME

2023

WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

Mercy and "the real world"

I'm frequently asked about "doing" the work of Jesus in "the real world". Sometimes it is skeptical—suggesting the way of Jesus is good *theory*, but not practical or even *realistic*. And sometimes it is optimistic—suggesting that it sounds good, but we don't know how to translate it to the modern world.

Both of these frame the way of love as, in a sense *unrealistic* and our world as *real*. And I think this is a rather dangerous way to see our world. Common, of course, but dangerous.

Mercy is real. And a remarkably good way of living one's life. Showing mercy, seeking mercy, making merciful families, churches, and communities.

What we're trying to say with our talk about "the real world" is to speak about cultural norms that are difficult to change. And often, we're talking about strategies which encourage growth *in spite of* these cultural norms. And that is totally challenging work.

But that junk is no more real and the change we seek is no less real. Which means "real" is not the right word. And a skeptical apprehension to change is not as beneficial a posture as we think. Not when we are seeking a better world. And when our hope is in the one behind that better world.

For people of faith, being realistic starts with naming the ways of the Kin-dom as real. Love is real. Mercy is real. Hope is real. Real in us and all we do.

With love,
Drew

ORDINARY TIME

2023

FOR SUNDAY

Proper 19A

September 17, 2023

Collect

O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Reading

Matthew 18:21-35

Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

PENTECOST

Reflection

Mercy is one of the most attractive and difficult aspects of faith. We love the idea that God is merciful on us. And we want to be merciful people. And, for people of faith, that wanting to is a really big deal.

We receive a message about mercy for the very reason we think we need that reminder.

Matthew 18 begins with a question about greatness in heaven. Which, as Jesus keeps repeating, looks like the opposite of greatness in our world. And what it looks like in our world is domination, vengeance, and pride.

It also looks like rejection, division, and oppression. Ignoring the needs of the lost and casting out the one who doesn't get the program.

Jesus invites them to welcome, instead. Forgive the penitent. Without attaching strings. No proving they'll go to rehab. Or that they're poor enough to need the help. Helping just because they ask for it.

Jesus's reminder for the one in a position to offer mercy is that God showed mercy on them. And where in the Kin-dom would *they* be if God had treated them like they chose to treat others? What pain and hurt in the world are we responsible for? And what joy and health could we be if we were so merciful?

We transform the world with who we are. With who we choose to be.

So, yes, we could be cruel, selfish, or full of justification. And foster a cruel, selfish, and justified world. Or we can be merciful. Forgive. Love. And with us, find the Kin-dom.

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