

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Trinity 4 – June 23, 2024
Luke 6:36-42 – Justice and Mercy
Rev Peter Wagner

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last week and this week are both about fathers. Last week, the parable of the prodigal son revealed the Father's love. We all need to return to the Father and come to church to receive his love and mercy. And now this week, Jesus the Son says, "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." So this week is about how we should live in the church, having received God's mercy here. We should forgive one another and show mercy, as our Father has done for us.

In our Father, as Psalm 85:10 declares, "Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other." Righteousness and peace, like a loving father and a just judge, all rolled into one. On the one hand, God is a righteous and just judge, who requires justice for all sin, the due penalty. If a judge overlooked sin, if iniquity went unpunished and evildoers went free, then God would be unjust and unrighteous. The innocent would suffer. But our God is just. He executes righteousness for all who are oppressed.

On the other hand, an absolutely just judge who always went exactly by the book would be cruel and unmerciful. There would be no second chances, no reason to repent. So our Father in heaven is also a God of steadfast love and peace. Though he justly condemns the wicked, condemnation brings him no pleasure. Rather, he seeks peace and reconciliation with sinners. He seeks his lost children.

And today, in our readings, the justice of our God meets his love and mercy, so that they kiss. In his righteousness, our judge perfectly upholds justice, without neglecting his Fatherly love and mercy. He's absolutely just and absolutely merciful, at the same time. And oh what a glorious blessing that is to us, wretched, guilty sinners.

Today's Old Testament reading about Joseph and his brothers magnificently illustrates the two sides of our God's character, perfectly balanced, justice and mercy. Joseph, as second in command of all Egypt, had the authority of judgment. It was his duty to carry out justice and righteousness. Yet he wisely carried out justice with an aim toward mercy.

As for his brothers, they were wicked. They sold him into slavery purely out of spite and envy. So when they came to Egypt to buy grain during the famine, when Joseph recognized them after so many years, he was harsh. He carried out justice. He accused them of spying and put Simeon in prison. He demanded that next time they bring Benjamin to prove their story. Then he sent them home with the money in their sacks, to awaken and terrify their guilty consciences.

When they returned with the extra money and Benjamin, Joseph didn't stop. He sent them off with his silver cup hidden in Benjamin's sack. He drove them to despair by ordering Benjamin seized. So the brothers tore their robes and came back before him utterly terrified, blaming each other and blaming themselves, even saying that God was bringing this disaster on them because of the evil they did to Joseph so long ago.

Through it all, they never recognized their brother. They never realized he was carrying out the justice of God in love. For Joseph's actions were carefully calculated not to make them suffer, but to bring them to repentance, so they might be forgiven, so they might receive mercy.

And the mercy was amazing. When the time came, he fell on their necks and kissed them and brought them into the feast. And they were dumbfounded. They couldn't believe it was Joseph. They couldn't believe he would forgive them. Even years later, after they settled in Goshen, they still assumed he would eventually take revenge. So when their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." And they sent word to him, "Your father gave this command before he died, 'Say to Joseph, Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father."

Joseph wept when he heard this. He wept because he saw that they still did not understand the righteousness and mercy of God. He told them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

Joseph is a picture of the justice and mercy of our Father in his perfectly righteous and merciful Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Justice and mercy, righteousness and peace, forgiveness and penalty, they're all married perfectly in Christ Jesus.

But as with Joseph, the mercy of Christ dominates. His justice is motivated by mercy. We are the wicked brothers that Jesus has every right to hate. But our just penalty of sin fell on him. God's retribution for our rebellion, for all our wicked thoughts and deeds, it all fell on Christ. Jesus bore it on the cross. Then in place of condemnation, all God's blessing fell to us. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And now in this life, the discipline and suffering that our Father sends us is gentle, meant only to awaken our hard consciences and bring us to repentance, like Joseph with his brothers. God's discipline drives us back to his mercy and forgiveness in the church.

But now, receiving these blessings changes everything. It changes how we must live. So in the gospel reading, our just and merciful Lord teaches us how to live together. Jesus commands us to imitate his justice and mercy, with each other. "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you."

There it is. The mercy of God and his justice. But mercy is what dominates. Judge no, says Jesus. Be merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged. Let God be the judge, not you. Only within proper God-given vocations are you to judge, according to the authority God gives. Otherwise, judge not. Let God condemn the wicked. You concentrate on mercy. God will judge those who judge, he will condemn those who condemn, and he will show mercy to the merciful.

None of this prohibits the church from reproof, rebuking, and calling sinners to repentance. We certainly can. Christ has given the church, his authority of the office of the keys, carried out by called ministers, to bind and loose, forgive and retain sins, all for the sake of mercy. Churchly rebuke is not judging or condemning. No, we rebuke with forgiveness as our goal, just as God used Joseph to discipline his brothers and drive them to repentance, so they might be reconciled.

So be merciful. Imitate your Lord, whose justice is motivated by mercy. "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." Imitate the Father who chose not to curse us, even though our wicked words and deeds deserve the curse of death. No, he gave his only Son in our place so his blessing and mercy might fall on us.

This is the Christian way, as we learn to live together in the church. "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

And never take vengeance. Leave it all to God, like Joseph who refused to take vengeance on his brothers, "For vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

To the sinner who lives under the justice and mercy of God, these commands are no burden. Showing mercy is no hardship. It's all joy, a privilege to love our enemies as Christ loved us. For remember how he prayed for us, while we were still his enemies. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

So meditate on the commands of your Father in heaven. Put them in action, because of the kindness he's shown you. Forgive and be forgiven, love and be loved. Put away disputes and grudges. Speak no gossip. Build up the church in righteous patience. Exhort your brothers and sisters to live righteously. And above all, let mercy dominate and motivate. Show mercy and love, patience and forgiveness, everything you've already received in abundance. Then in Christ Jesus, your Father's righteousness and mercy will kiss and bless this congregation. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.