

Justice is Good, Mercy is Better

Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; Luke 6:27-38

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Once upon a time, two brothers who lived on adjoining farms fell into conflict. It was the first serious rift in 40 years of farming side-by-side, sharing machinery, trading labor and goods. Then the long collaboration fell apart. It began with a small misunderstanding, and it grew into a big difference. Finally, it exploded into an exchange of bitter words, followed by weeks and weeks of silence.

One morning there was a knock on the older brother's door. He opened it to find a man with the carpenter's toolbox. I'm looking for a few days' work, he said. Perhaps you might have a few small jobs here and there. Could I help you?

Yes, said the older brother. I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That's my neighbor. In fact, that's my younger brother. Last week there was a meadow between us, but then he took his bulldozer to the river levee and now it's a creek. A big wide creek between us. Well, he may have done this despite me, but I'm going to go in one better. I want you to build me a fence, an 8-foot fence so I don't have to see his place anymore. It'll show him.

"I think I understand," the carpenter said. "I'll be able to do a job that makes you happy."

The older brother had to go to town for supplies and so he was off for the day.

The carpenter worked all day and hard into the evening, measuring, sawing and nailing. About sunset, the farmer returned. The carpenter had finished. The farmer happily gazed across the meadow at what he assumed would be a beautiful, tall fence. But there was no fence at all.

The carpenter had built a bridge, a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other. A fine piece of work hand rails and all, and the neighbor, the younger brother was coming across. His hand outstretched. "You are an awfully good person," he called to his older brother. "To build this bridge. After all I've said and done." And the two brothers stood in the middle of the bridge and embraced.

Remember last week when Jesus came down from the mountain and he stood among the people on the level plane? He stood there among all the people, the people who were suffering, the people who are trapped in poverty, the people who needed healing. He is still standing there today. Our scripture is a continuation of Jesus talking to the people on the level plain. He is still talking about the Kingdom of God and he is telling them what it means to act like a member of God's Kingdom.

He says, standing among those hurting people, he says, love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. If someone takes your coat, don't withhold your shirt. Give to everyone who asks, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Justice is good, he is saying to them. But mercy. Mercy is better.

The rub is that those people had never seen justice, let alone mercy. They had never seen justice because they lived in a society that was without justice. They lived under the occupation of the Romans, and they lived under the thumb of an oppressor.

Justice is all they longed for. That in a fair court, a fair trial, they would receive a fair shake. And that's all the people wanted. The people who are poor, the people who stood on that level plane.

And so, it is no doubt that they were surprised. Maybe even angered, by Jesus words. Because they realized that Jesus wasn't telling them to demand justice. He was telling them to respond with mercy.

Offer a bridge, he was saying to them. Not a fence.

Justice is giving what it is honestly and fairly deserved. Mercy is the offer of compassion or forgiveness. Mercy is what you give instead of justice when you live in God's Kingdom. Mercy is compassion and kindness. Mercy is love and forgiveness.

Over and over, Jesus demonstrated mercy instead of justice. He welcomed the stranger. He forgave the guilty, even pardoning those who persecuted him and finally killed him.

Pope Francis puts it well. He tells us that Jesus was not mercy in the abstract, he was mercy in the visceral. A mercy that literally changes us from the inside out.

So Jesus was telling these people, these downtrodden, suffering people standing on the level plain that in the Kingdom of God mercy is offered first.

Justice is good. But Mercy is better.

In my first church, we started a soup kitchen called Open Table for people who were homeless or nearly homeless. And there were a lot of homeless or nearly homeless people in this small town in Iowa. Before we started the program, most people thought there weren't any at all because everything looked fine. But that's the way homelessness is. Homelessness hides itself. It hides itself in garages and under bridges and sleeping on somebody's couch. But homelessness is a tragic problem everywhere.

People came from all over to share a free meal in the basement of the church. Eventually, the meal which attracted about 100 to 120 people, evolved into a community. The people began to come to Bible study, to church. They even had their own early morning coffee group that met in the fellowship hall. And then, one time they gathered to do a fund-raiser for the church. A huge tag sale with used books, clothes, and other items all donated by the church and town.

The money from the fundraiser was to be donated to the church. We often forget that living at the very edge of poverty robs the individual of the gift of giving. Homeless people never have the joy of giving. To survive they must always take. The thought of giving the money to the church, I think, was part of the energy and enthusiasm behind the tag sale.

And so this opportunity to band together and do a tag sale in the church basement was a big moment. The group clearly enjoyed working with each other.

And if any of you have done a church yard sale or tag sale, you know how really consuming and exhausting it can be. And yet they did it. The church basement was filled with long tables

covered with all sorts of donated items, clothing, a bake sale, everything you could do in one huge, extravagant day of hard work and fellowship.

I was there for the morning and when I went back down in the early evening, the organizers were sitting around a table. The sale was over and at the table there was a great feeling of camaraderie and accomplishment.

They regaled me with the stories of the sale. What items sold first, how much people loved the baked goods.

In the middle of the table was a metal box, a cashbox and in it was a wad of bills and some loose change. The sale organizers excitedly told me that it was \$236. and a bunch of loose change.

That was a lot of money, and it was a lot of hard work. And it was a lot of good feeling.

A few hours later, I got a phone call at home from one of the organizers. "It's gone, Reverend, all the money is gone. Someone stole it."

A few days later, it was time for Open Table, our dinner together and all the same people who had participated in the in the tag sale came to the dinner. Although the church people had started Open Table, by this time the recipients, the homeless people had taken over running it. They set up the tables, cleaning up afterwards. So everybody was there that night. The tables were filled, about 100 people in the room.

And at every meal before we started, I would do a prayer. And announcements. So I began that night by saying, "Congratulations, you know, thank you to everyone who works so hard. And I'm sorry to announce that the money has been stolen."

The room stayed silent. All the people sitting there. Completely quiet. It wasn't an angry silence or a cold silence. It was a gentle silence. A quiet, waiting silence.

People who are homeless live a very different life than I do. I have to admit that I can barely relate to it.

If this had been a church meeting of more solidly middle class, upper middle class people like ourselves in a church meeting. I think it would have been different.

Somebody else might stand up. "Who was the treasurer? Are you telling me that you formed a tag sale committee but didn't appoint officers? You should have appointed a treasurer and they would have kept hold of that money."

"Pastor, now listen, we can't just let people get away with this. Someone takes the money this time. What's going to happen next time?"

And then somebody else would have stood up and said, "I want to know who reported it was it reported the police?"

Somebody else would stand up and say, "Where are those surveillance cameras that we spent so much money on? Did anybody notice someone suspicious leaving the church?"

A real church congregation, not a group of homeless people, would have wanted justice. They would have pursued justice.

But in the room that night? No one said anything. They all sat in a merciful silence, a quiet.

So I said the prayer. We started our meal. And we, we had a lot of fellowship together. It was a good meal, I remember.

And then, when it was over, everyone pitched in to clean. There wasn't an official clean up committee. Everyone who was still there when the meal ended just stayed to clean. And finally, we were in the kitchen doing the final touches.

And there was a church lady who always helped with Open Table, a kitchen lady named Kathy, and she always made sure things were absolutely perfect. And so she was going around wiping down every horizontal surface as she always did. I saw her climb up on a chair to wipe down the top of the refrigerator.

Then I heard her say, "Well, look at this. Well, look at this."

And she pulled out one of the plastic bread baskets that we always used in the meal. And in the basket was a pile of cash. \$236 and a bunch of change.

Justice is good. But mercy is better.

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Rev. Jane apologizes, but she preaches from her notes, - so her sermons may not translate as well into a printed, document format. However, she loves to discuss her sermons, - so feel free to email her with any thoughts or questions!