

The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, February 23, 2025

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminster, Massachusetts

Mission Impossible: Mercy

Luke 6:27–38

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

Jesus said: **“Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for He is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful”** (vv 35–36).

I once heard of a man who suffered deeply. He was plotted against and betrayed by his closest companions. They stabbed him in the back without any remorse or second thoughts. And then, when they could've come clean, they chose to make up a story to cover their tracks—and others believed it. Meanwhile, the betrayed guy suffered quite a few twists and turns in his life. He was enslaved. He had false accusations made against him. He ended up unjustly imprisoned. Every time you thought he'd hit rock bottom, things got even worse. He was used and humiliated, forgotten by those he befriended, and mistreated over and over again.

Until one day his life took a radical change for the better. It wasn't luck. It wasn't fate. It wasn't even hard work. It was God—divine providence. With the Lord's help, the suffering man came into a position of great authority. Whatever he said, it was done. And then came a moment he'd probably been dreaming about: The very people who betrayed him decades earlier stood in front of him. The tables were turned. This time, their lives were in his hands. They didn't recognize him, but he knew who they were. How could he forget all they'd done to him?

And what would you do, if you were in his shoes? What if the moment you've dreamed about came true? What if *that* person or *those* people stood in front of you now and they finally had to answer for what they've said or done, for the misery and sleepless nights they've caused? What if you could pay them back without their ever knowing about it? Would you ask God to punish him? To destroy her? Would you do to them as they've done to you? That person who cheated you. The one who lied about you. The guy who took credit for your work. The gal who spread gossip about you. That dude who dented your car and drove off. Oh, sweet revenge!

Our culture would tell us to give it back just like we received it. Turnabout's fair play. With the measure you received, measure it back to them—and maybe add a little extra for interest. We've been taught to stand up for ourselves. From the playground to the water cooler, ain't no one gonna push me around. You can't just let people walk all over you. If you want others to respect you, you've got to respect yourself. Learn to set boundaries. Say "no." Otherwise you'll be taken advantage of. And everyone assumes that being taken advantage of, being played for a fool, being treated with disrespect, being the object of hatred, or simply being dismissed is the ultimate failure in life.ⁱ

Jesus knows differently. In our Gospel reading, He offers a vision for His disciples and for the Church. Quite simply, He calls His disciples to love their enemies. And He describes this in concrete detail. Listen again to what He teaches:

^{27b}But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. ³¹And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

His kingdom is clearly *not* of this world:

³²If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. ^{35a}But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. (vv 27b–35a)

"But that's impossible," we think! And so it is—for sinners. We sinners know how to love those who love us. We sinners know how to do good to those who do good to us. That's called a quid pro quo. You take care of me; I'll take care of you. But to love, truly love our enemies? We don't have that in us. To be offered a moment of sweet revenge and use it to forgive? No way! Who in their right mind would do that?

Jesus. That's who. Some accused Him of being out of His mind. But, in fact, He was the only one *in* His right mind. It's the rest of the world that's gone crazy. Everyone else has forgotten what it really means to live—including us. We think that living means living for ourselves. But Jesus says that's not life; that's death.

Jesus was hated, cursed, beaten, abused, stripped, abandoned, and crucified. St. Peter tells it this way in his First Letter:

For to this you have been called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in His steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in His mouth. When He was reviled, He didn't threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly. He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.
(1 Peter 2:21-25)

What was the hardest thing our Lord ever had to do? Was it looking at those who drove the railroad spikes into His wrists and feet and saying not “Curse them” but **“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”** (Luke 23:34)? This suffering was the triumph of God's love. The Son of the Most High is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. He shows mercy, even as His Father in heaven is merciful. Jesus is a window into the heart of the Trinity. In Him, we see not the wrath of God but the love of the Father.

And then—after His suffering—He came into a position of great authority. He rose from the dead, the firstfruits of those who are made alive. But His resurrection was no revenge tour. He didn't hunt down those who hurt Him to pay them back. True, He did corner St. Peter—he who denied Him three times—but only to restore him to the flock and to the office of pastor. He didn't say, “I'm done with you forever,” but, **“Feed my sheep”** (John 20:17). He appeared to St. Paul—the enemy who imprisoned His followers—and made him an apostle. Jesus does just what He said on the cross. He forgives. God's love is powerful. In the resurrection, Jesus has overcome cursing and abuse and even death itself.

That doesn't make it easy, of course. We can't just nod our heads and agree that this is a good idea. It's something to be lived—every day, of every month, of every year. How is this even possible? Only with a new life. With wounds healed by Him. With Jesus having cleared the path for us. It starts with His prayer on the cross for us: “Father, forgive them.” And you are forgiven. Revenge isn't God's proper work. His proper work, what comes naturally to Him, is to be kind to the ungrateful and the evil. **Your Father is merciful** (v 36). He's merciful to you still today in Jesus Christ. He even gives you the bread of peace and the cup of mercy.

So now what becomes of all your dreams of revenge? What will you do with the hurts you nurse and the grudges you bear? How will you pray for your enemies and bless those who've cursed you? Will you follow the advice of the world? Or will you look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith? St. Paul tells us what we should do: **“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he's thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you'll heap burning coals on his head.’ Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”** (Romans 12:20–21).

We love because He first loved us, and continues to do so. We bless because He first blessed us. We give because He first gave to us. We turn the other cheek because He first turned the other cheek. We pray for others because He first prayed for us. We forgive because He first forgave us.ⁱⁱ

So what about the man whom I told you about in the beginning? What did he do when the brothers who sold him into slavery stood within his power? What was his sweet revenge? **Joseph said to his brothers, “Come near to me, please.” And they came near. And he said, “I'm your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. . . . God sent me before you to preserve life. . . . It was not you who sent me here but God. . . .” Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them** (Genesis 45:4, 7, 8, 14–15).

He provided for them and fed them and forgave them and heaped burning coals of love on their heads. He was merciful. He couldn't forget all that God had done. Neither can we.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7

ⁱ David Schmitt, “Gospel: Luke 6:27–38 (Epiphany 7: Series C),” *Craft of Preaching*, 2/23/25.

ⁱⁱ Francis Rossow, *Gospel Handles*, p. 188.