

The Way of Mercy

February 19, 2017
Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Christopher Tollefsen

Readings: Leviticus 19.1-2, 17-18; 1 Corinthians 3.16-23;
Matthew 5.38-48

The Year of Mercy has ended, but today's readings remind us that the lessons of that year should not be forgotten. For the way of mercy is the way to which Christians are specifically called. That way is a more than human way; but it is made possible for us by our life in God, the Father, Son, and Spirit.

The Need for Justice

What is the human way? It should, at the least, be a way of justice. That way is demanding enough for human persons in the wake of original sin. Justice can be difficult to remember when we are seeking what is good for ourselves or what we want. Even family and friends can be the objects of resentment, jealousy, and hatred when they stand in our way or treat us poorly. So it is moral progress for a people to learn, as the Israelites do:

Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart, but reprove him openly, lest thou incur sin through him.

Seek not revenge, nor be mindful of the injury of thy citizens. Thou shalt love thy friend as thyself. I am the Lord.

Of course, loving brothers and friends is hardly enough for justice. Fairness and justice demand equality of treatment of all God's children, and we are tempted to exclude those who are unlike or not near to us: those unlike us as to race, religion, or color; those unlike us in being not yet born, or born without the same range of abilities as the rest of us; those who are geographically strangers to us. The history of injustice is in many respects a history of unjust exclusion.

So it is moral progress as well when we learn that the Golden Rule demands that we treat *all* others as we would be treated, and yet again when we learn from Jesus, even more demandingly, that we should *love* our neighbor as ourselves. And who is our neighbor? The parable of the Good Samaritan suggests that this question is to be answered by considering which people we can be neighbors *to*. That is a demanding suggestion.

There are other ways to get the demands of justice wrong. Our understanding of fairness and justice can be distorted by misunderstanding the demands of equality:

"You have heard it said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."

Too often we are tempted by this understanding of justice, tempted to think that those who have made us suffer should be equally made to suffer, that we should "get our own" back, that we should be exacting in our treatment of the sins and debts of others. But this can hardly be what Jesus means when he tells us we should *love* our neighbor as ourselves, for this is not how we love ourselves, and he clearly intends for his disciples to transcend such a narrow understanding.

Mercy, Evil, and Enemies

But it can come as a surprise to learn just how great a transcendence he expects of us. At least in today's readings, Jesus allows us a bit of a warm-up before he gets to his most extraordinary demands. Jesus says,

*I say to you not to resist evil: but if one strike thee on thy right cheek, turn to him also the other:
And if a man will contend with thee in judgment, and take away thy coat, let go thy cloak also
unto him.*

*And whosoever will force thee one mile, go with him other two,
Give to him that asketh of thee and from him that would borrow of thee turn not away.*

Here Jesus begins to go beyond what justice demands, to the form of charity and love that we call mercy. God's mercy, as the moral theologian Germain Grisez writes, "is his steadfast love, by which he continues to love his creatures despite their sins and does everything necessary to save fallen humankind. This steadfast love overcomes sin, the greatest evil, and so is the greatest mercy."

The same is true for human love in the face of evil, if it is to be truly Godlike: love is mercy not simply by being and doing good, but by being and doing good in the face of evil so as to draw good out of it.

The first three examples given by Jesus each involve an apparent violation of justice: someone strikes you, or takes your cloak, or forces you to walk with him. Justice surely entitles one to resist: that is only fair! And even the requests of the fourth example could often fairly be rebuffed: my property is mine, and what you ask to borrow is often what I already have plans for.

But in each case, Jesus asks his Christian disciples to do more than settle for earthly justice: not to resist, not to assert one's rights or to keep what is one's own. Why? Because he is asking that his disciples show mercy, asking that they extend to their malefactors an offer of reconciliation, of peace and communion.

Well, that makes sense. If your brother, friend, or neighbor mistreats you, what good could come of extending the hostilities? Surely it is just common sense to remember that you will still be brothers, friends, or neighbors tomorrow, and set about the healing process right away. But Jesus asks for more:

*You have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thy enemy.
But I say to you, Love your enemies do good to them that hate you: and pray for them that persecute
and calumniate you.*

This is surely more than justice, more than the demands of ordinary morality that all share in virtue of their common humanity. Surely morality demands no more, where your enemies and persecutors are concerned, than that you avoid them. Can it really require that you love them?

Love, Mercy, and God

It can if you are a Christian. For Christians are the adopted sons and daughters of the Father through baptism; they are brothers and sisters to Jesus, and share in his glorified Body in the Eucharist; they are given the gift of the Spirit and know that they "are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in" them.

As sons and daughters of the Father, brothers and sisters of the Son, temples of the Spirit, Christians are required, and empowered, to love as God loves, to be holy, "because I the Lord your God am holy."

The all-encompassing goodness, compassion, and mercy of the Lord were known to the Israelites:

Who forgiveth all thy iniquities: who healeth all thy diseases.

Who redeemeth thy life from destruction: who crowneth thee with mercy and compassion.

The Lord is compassionate and merciful: longsuffering and plenteous in mercy.

He hath not dealt with us according to our sins: nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.

Jesus calls such verses to mind in drawing the appropriate lesson for those who are “in Christ”:

Be you therefore perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect.

Only in this way can the love of God, love brought into our own lives in baptism and in the Eucharist through the grace of the Spirit, be both lived and revealed in our lives. And thus shall they know we are Christians.

Loving Enemies

By enemies, Jesus means in particular those who hate, persecute, and calumniate Christians. While in some parts of the world, hatred and persecution of Christians is violent, pervasive, and lethal, these exist for most of us in “softer” but nevertheless real forms: in those who decry Christians as “bigots,” or deride them as “superstitious,” or who take appeals for religious freedom as invocations of a right to invidious discrimination.

What is involved in the concrete practice of mercy towards such people? The readings give us a few guidelines. Jesus tells us, for example, that we must pray for those who hate us. We must pray that their eyes will be opened to moral truth, and to the truth of the gospel. We must pray for the conversion of their hearts.

We must also “do good to them that hate you.” Our everyday lives offer opportunities for providing real benefits to those who hate us and to avoid occasions for doing them ill. Think of how much good could be done to enemies simply by more temperate behavior on social media, for instance.

Finally, we must be always ready to forgive. The Lord is “longsuffering” and does not deal with others in accordance with their sins. We too must always be willing to extend forgiveness, and not in accordance with what is deserved. For in loving all God’s children, even to the point of such forgiveness, we love as God loves. This is what Jesus wants for us.

The demands that are special to Christians are not meant to place extra work on us, but to open up to us a new and inconceivably better life: the life in the Spirit that has been prepared for us by adoption into the life of a God who, as Pope St. John Paul II reminded us, “cannot reveal Himself otherwise than as mercy.”

About the Author

Christopher Tollefsen is College of Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of South Carolina.

FOR FURTHER READING

Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*: <http://www.randomhousebooks.com/campaign/the-name-of-god-is-mercy>

Germain Grisez, *Christian Moral Principles*, chapter 26, question H, available at:

<http://www.twotlj.org/G-1-26-H.html>

Germain Grisez, *Living a Christian Life*, chapter 6, question F, available at: <http://www.twotlj.org/G-2-6-F.html>

St. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, available at: <https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals>

IN SHORT . . .

- ***The Golden Rule demands that we treat all others as we would be treated, and Jesus even more demandingly teaches that we should love our neighbor as ourselves.***
- ***Jesus goes beyond what justice demands, to the form of charity and love that we call mercy.***
- ***Human love, if it is truly Godlike, is mercy by being and doing good in the face of evil so as to draw good out of it.***
- ***Jesus tells us to pray for those who hate us, that their eyes will be opened to moral truth and to the truth of the gospel, and that their hearts will be converted.***
- ***The demands special to Christians are not meant to place extra work on us, but to open up to us a new and inconceivably better life in the Spirit.***