

All Saints C
November 3, 2019
Luke 6:20-31

THE MERCY CURVE

Helen didn't allow the fact that she was legally blind keep her from reaching out to others. Everyone around Helen knew her as a befriender who led with her compassionate heart.

Delores's face seemed built for smiling. Through all life's transitions she found a way to "go with the flow," and joy was always near at hand.

Betty, dear Betty, she got it—got grace. Faith for her was a living thing—as real and as tangible as the wonderful crescent rolls she'd bake and share; something to be celebrated, wrestled with, acted upon, lived.

And Dick, he brought his baritone to church choirs wherever he lived, and in a long life of service—as a pharmacist, businessman, mayor, and congregational leader—knew how to show up in the lives of others.

Nadine's smile lit up the room, taking you into her orbit. Her eyes told you there was no one in the world more important at that moment; that you were in the circle with her and were loved.

Then there's Carl, rock-steady Carl; whose lifelong work ethic made him the GO-TO GUY for bosses, co-workers, shipmates, family members, and fellow congregants alike.

Finally, there's lovely Margot—intently relational, forever curious, disciple of Jesus. Eager to discern where her faith journey—and yours—would venture next; and always ready to take the burdens of others—and her own—to the Lord in prayer.

It's a rich legacy these sisters and brothers have left for our congregation! Their lives and stories held close in the benevolent embrace of the One who made them his own in the waters of baptism.

There are others we must add to the list of those whom we have lost in the last year—though "lost" is not the right word because a part of them remains with us when we allow it.

For me, personally, my mother Shirley is most prominent among them. And you have your own dear ones you're remembering today. And some of them surround us here this morning—reminders of the great cloud of witnesses, the community of saints.

Today we pause to lift them up—all of them—to the God whose mercy endures forever, whose grace is wide enough, whose capacity for love deep enough, to gather them all into the Everlasting Arms.

When they leave this life, we tend to focus on the best attributes our loved ones showed us. But we know full well that not all of their story is pretty—nor is ours.

I recall one graveside service at which I officiated. Just as we gathered around the grave, an off-handed remark by an adult son revealed something about the deceased I had had no clue about.

His mother, he told me, never fully accepted the grandchildren who came into her life through his second spouse. And neither he nor anyone else in the family knew why.

His comment was a revelation, and in that moment the words I was prepared to share were set aside. And I found myself searching for language to talk about the challenge that comes when we simply do not understand the choices and decisions—some of them deeply hurtful—that those we love have made in life.

Not all legacies are helpful or healthful. And those that will not serve us we must relinquish. So in every funeral and graveside service at which I've presided there's always a petition that God would heal any memory of hurt or failure that may be present; that God would teach us forgiveness, that God would take whatever is unfinished or incomplete in our lives and make it whole.

Sisters and brothers, the GOOD NEWS is, with Jesus, we don't need to pretend. With Jesus, we don't need to hide. With Jesus, we can look into the mirror without trying to conceal the parts of ourselves of which we are ashamed. For in Jesus, God's mercy enfolds us, warts and all.

And this is the context in which we hear the gospel from Luke this morning.

Now, we're most accustomed to hearing Matthew's version of this sermon of Jesus—the "Sermon on the Mount." But today, the way Luke tells it, it's not a sermon on the mount but a sermon on the plain that Jesus delivers, to people on the ground; weary, dirty, hungry, and provocatively close.¹ Not up in the rarified air of the mountains but down on the floor of the valley where we go about our ordinary lives.

And not only is the setting in Luke different from Matthew; there are significant differences in content as well.

In Matthew, Jesus speaks in the third person...BLESSED ARE THEY.

And we are left to decide on our own whether what follows can be applied to us or not.

But here in Luke, Jesus uses the personal, second person address, BLESSED ARE YOU... followed by the shocking, **WOE TO YOU...** and now we're left with our breath caught in our throat, because the YOU he addresses isn't a hypothetical somebody somewhere—it's ME, it's US.

**You're BLESSED when your poor, hungry, weeping, hated.
But WOE! there's trouble ahead when you think you've got it made.**

This is reversal language. And it really shouldn't surprise us.

It's been on God's agenda from the beginning; and on Luke's radar screen ever since young Mary, newly pregnant, recognized in her call to bear Jesus, a God who...

SCATTERS THE PROUD AND LIFTS UP THE LOWLY,
WHO FILLS THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS, AND SENDS THE RICH AWAY EMPTY.²

If there was any doubt about how he understood his ministry, Jesus set the matter straight in his first public sermon:

THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD...HAS ANOINTED ME TO BRING GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR.
...TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND,
TO LET THE OPPRESSED GO FREE, TO PROCLAIM THE LORD'S JUBILEE. [Luke 4:18-19]

¹ Oluwatomisin Oredein, writing in *Christian Century*, October 8, 2019. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/november-1-all-saints-day-luke-620-31?code=Scsxf6Y7YqoPijQ1TS00>

² Luke 1:46-55

Even the home crowd trying to hurl him off a cliff couldn't lessen Jesus' commitment to a new order.

So today, now that he's got our attention after all those blessings and woes, he lays it out once more:
LOVE YOUR ENEMIES, DO GOOD TO THOSE WHO HATE YOU, BLESS THOSE WHO
CURSE YOU...DO TO OTHERS AS YOU WOULD HAVE THEM DO TO YOU.

You know, there's "**edgy**" and then there's "**over the edge**," and it seems to me that Jesus is closer to the latter than to the former.

In fact, listening to this sermon of Jesus makes me more than a tad bit uncomfortable. Which seems to be just where he wants me to be.

Not that Jesus gets a kick out of keeping me off balance; it's just that he doesn't seem to have the capacity for anything less than a fearlessly honest position.

And, here's the clincher, he seems to expect the same from any of us who would follow him.

IF YOU LOVE THOSE WHO LOVE YOU, Jesus says in verses that follow our text, WHAT CREDIT IS THAT TO YOU? SINNERS DO THAT... IF YOU DO GOOD TO THOSE WHO DO GOOD TO YOU, WHAT CREDIT IS THAT TO YOU? THAT'S HOW THE WORLD BEHAVES.

BUT LOVE YOUR ENEMIES, DO GOOD, AND LEND, EXPECTING NOTHING IN RETURN. YOUR REWARD WILL BE GREAT, AND YOU WILL BE CHILDREN OF THE MOST HIGH; FOR GOD IS KIND TO THE UNGRATEFUL AND THE WICKED. BE MERCIFUL, JUST AS YOUR FATHER IS MERCIFUL.³

BE MERCIFUL... Ah, so finally, we get to where Jesus was aiming all along. MERCY.

Finally, as St. Paul says, with "the eyes of our hearts enlightened" we know the hope to which we've been called: **to live our lives with mercy!** Not "quid pro quo." Not "you scratch my back I scratch yours." Not by keeping track of favors and making sure they come out even in the end.

But by a simple patterning of our own lives after the mercy our heavenly Father has shown us, one day and one relationship at a time.

The saints whose lives and witness we mark this day are simply people who, having been claimed by Christ, found themselves on that mercy learning curve.

And so, by the grace of God, do we. Amen.

³ Luke 6:32-36