

DO UNTO OTHERS: GIVE WITH MERCY

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Luke 6 various

Jesus is addressing a crowd when a lawyer in the crowd poses a question. The lawyer asks, *Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?* Jesus asks him to explain what scripture has to say on this matter, and the man replies, *You shall love the Lord God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.* Jesus tells him that he he's got it. But the man pushes on asking, *Just how do you define neighbor?* And Jesus tells a story.

"A man is traveling on the dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Robbers ambush him. They beat him, take everything he owns, and leave him naked in the road, half dead. A priest is traveling on that same road and when he comes to the man, he walks around him and continues on. A little later, another holy man, a Levite, does the same thing. Then a man from Samaria discovers the victim and the Samaritan is moved to pity. He performs some basic first aid and then lifts the man onto his donkey and transports him to an inn and cares for him there. The next day, the Samaritan has to move on and so he leaves money with the innkeeper with instructions to care for the injured man. The Samaritan tells the innkeeper that he will return and reimburse him for any additional expenses." Jesus then asks the lawyer which of the three was a neighbor to the victim. The lawyer responds saying, *The one who showed him mercy.* Jesus says, *Go and do likewise.*

The purpose of the Gospel of Luke is not just to teach us about Jesus, but also about Jesus' message, specifically how we are to exemplify the kingdom of God.

Today's sermon is the final one in a three-week series called "Do Unto Others." In this series I have focused on the middle third of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus provides us with a description of what it is like to live in God's kingdom. The lawyer wanted to know how he might attain *eternal life*. Eternal life is another way to describe God's realm.

What is God's kingdom like? God's kingdom is where neighbors are loved, and enemies as well. Twice in this sermon Jesus instructs his followers, *Love your enemies.* In the kingdom, we are to *do good to those who hate us.* In the kingdom, we are to *bless those who curse us.* In the kingdom, we are to *pray for those who abuse us.* In the kingdom, we are to lend freely and expect nothing in return. In the kingdom, we are to help others without calculating the cost. In the kingdom, we are to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, strength, and mind. In the kingdom, we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

For this final sermon, I want to circle back and focus on a very short verse we encountered two weeks ago. This verse is the single most radical statement in our holy scripture. The verse I'm talking about is Jesus' command, *Give to everyone who asks from you.*¹

Give to everyone who asks from you is a simple, powerful, radical command. It is one that would up-end the world if we were to practice it.

This week, I ran this verse past my clergy group and immediately they began adding qualifiers. What is the person asking for? Do they deserve it? Should they have it? I pointed out that Jesus doesn't place any qualifiers here. Jesus simply says *give*. For my clergy group—for all of us—this is a difficult concept to wrap our heads around—giving to anyone who asks. It makes us wonder what kind of world would that lead to? What would happen to me? Would people take advantage of me? What if I ended up giving everything away? Would I die hungry and destitute? That is our fear.

But I believe that these are the wrong questions. Jesus is talking about living in the kingdom. What is life like in the kingdom?

I posed this verse to my friend John Grant. Many of you know John. He is a pastor here in Lebanon and now serves as director of the homeless ministry called Compassionate Hands. John and I discussed this command of Jesus. John said that giving is the heart of the Compassionate Hands ministry. People have needs and the ministry seeks to meet those needs. But, he said, while we always give to people, we don't necessarily give what they ask for. You don't give cash to an addict. That is not good for them. Helping people can be tough. You try to give with love and mercy. John said that it requires a lot of prayer.

Our reading today concludes with the command, *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful*. The lawyer asked, *who is my neighbor?* The answer is one who shows mercy. To live in the kingdom, we should seek to emulate the king. God is merciful. We should seek to be merciful. God loves even those who do not love back. So should we. God gives to those who ask. So should we. God gives with mercy. So should we.

As those who are seekers of the kingdom, we will encounter people who are opposed to the kingdom. There will always be those who are threatened, if not frightened, by God's realm. These people prefer to inhabit their own kingdoms built on power and intimidation, where the weak are abused by the strong, where wealth

¹ The NRSV translation has the word beg, as in *Give to everyone who begs from you*. But the word in English should be ask. It is a formal ask; it is a request. For example, after Jesus had been crucified, Joseph of Arimathea goes to Pilate and *asks* to be given the body; he requests.

is hoarded. But Jesus urges his followers not to judge those who may hate us. When we judge, we fall into their trap. Do not judge; do not condemn. Instead, forgive. *Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give and it will be given to you.* The way we act towards others will be reflected back on us. Jesus tells a parable to illustrate this. He says, *A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.*

Think of a merchant in the market. You go to the merchant to buy grain. This merchant measures the grain into his basket and then pours it out into yours. But this merchant is honest and generous. You are going to get what you paid for. Instead of hurriedly filling the basket and pouring it out, the merchant shakes the basket, presses down on the grain, shakes it again, adds a little extra just to ensure a fair transaction. What we give, we will get back. For those who live the principles of God's kingdom, God will pour out on them the power of the kingdom.

I want to end with a story told by a woman name Rachel Romeo. To best understand this story, you need to know about Rachel Romeo. Rachel Romeo is a neuroscientist. Specifically, she is a developmental cognitive neuroscientist. She is also a speech-language pathologist. Her area of focus is language development in children. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania *summa cum laude*. She earned her PhD at Harvard. She is presently a post-doctoral fellow at MIT and the Boston Children's Hospital. All of this points to someone who is extremely smart and exceptionally qualified in their field.

Late this summer, Dr. Romeo had an experience that she shared online.² In August, Dr. Romeo was flying back to Boston from a conference overseas. The flight was eight hours long.

Seated next to her on the plane was a father and his son. The boy appeared to be about 10 years old. When she sat down, the father, in broken English, immediately began to apologize/warn her that his son had severe non-verbal autism and that this would likely be a difficult journey.

Dr. Romeo assured him that he need not worry, that she was a speech-language pathologist and that she had lots of experience with children just like this, children who were minimally verbal. As the father predicted, even before takeoff, the boy began exhibiting challenging behavior—screaming, hitting her, and grabbing for her things. She said the father repeatedly apologized but did little else.

At this point, Dr. Romeo had a choice. She could have done her best to ignore the child, turned her back and attempted to endure the extraordinarily long eight-

² <https://twitter.com/RachelRRomeo/status/1166817555257942016>

hour flight. No one would have blamed her. This wasn't her child. This wasn't her patient. This wasn't her problem.

But she didn't. Instead, she chose to give. She asked the father how his son preferred to communicate. She said the father didn't seem to understand. Perhaps this was a language barrier, but she believes instead that the child had had very little experience with communication therapy. She asked the father for permission to try something. He nodded yes.

One of the tools available to speech-language pathologists is AAC, which is short for Augmentative and Alternative Communication. AAC is defined as the use of other methods to replace or support verbal communication. The users of AAC are those individuals that have difficulty expressing their thoughts and ideas verbally. The reasons may include cerebral palsy, autism, apraxia, muscular dystrophy, and other conditions.

One form of alternative communication is to use an AAC device. A typical AAC device is a form of electronic tablet. On the screen of the tablet are pictures or pictograms. The individual can touch the picture and the device will speak the word for them. These devices can be as simple or as complex as the individual needs.

Dr. Romeo did not have such a device with her so she tried using her laptop computer by pulling up standard images for basic nouns. It quickly became clear to her that screen really bothered this boy. It was too much visual stimulation for him. So, she pulled out a notepad and a pen and started drawing. She made symbols for the things he was grabbing—his favorite stuffed penguin, his father.

She reports that this worked. The boy took to it very quickly. By the end of the flight, the boy had initiated several requests and his behaviors had reduced noticeably. She says the father was astounded. No one, it seems, had ever tried an AAC approach with his son. She said that she gave the father the paper and showed him to use it and he nearly cried.

As I said, Dr. Romeo was under no obligation to do anything. She could have simply endured the flight like any of us. But instead she chose to give.

All of us possess a basic desire to communicate, to express a thought, to share our feelings, to connect with another person. But here, on that plane, was a child trapped by his inability to communicate. Imagine the frustration and anger and fear welling inside of him. It is no wonder that he screamed and kicked and hit. Who wouldn't? Dr. Romeo gave him something, a key to communicate, a key to a new life. She points out that any speech-language pathologist could have done what she did. But that child had never met one.

Jesus commands, *Give to everyone who asks from you.* We worry about people taking our money, but there is so much more we can give. We can give compassion,

we can give our time, we can give our expertise. However, as we see in the stories of the Samaritan and the boy on the plane, we don't need to wait for a verbal request. Sometimes the person who needs help is unable to ask. Those who exemplify the kingdom live in such a way that giving is second nature. When we love God with our whole heart we give instinctively. Giving to everyone who asks doesn't mean waiting for someone to come up and ask for five dollars, it means always living with an eye towards our neighbors, watching for ways that we may respond with mercy.

The apostle Paul writes about loving God fully and completely. He says that no matter how much good we may do, it doesn't bring us any closer to the kingdom unless we also love God fully and completely. Paul writes, *If I give away all my possessions... but do not have love, I gain nothing* (1 Cor 13:3).

We don't deserve to live in God's realm, but God invites us anyway. God is merciful. If we desire to live in a world that reflects the qualities of God's kingdom, then we must treat others in kingdom-like ways. We must give with mercy.