

19 February 2017
Epiphany 7

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Merciful, Like Your Father”

Text: Matthew 5:38-48 (Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; 1 Corinthians 3:10-23)

After spending most of the week in the hospital with my father, a gentle re-working of a preachment from yesteryear . . .

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

What Jesus is talking about today is mercy. For mercy is what our Father in heaven is all about. If you're going to be like Him in any way, shape, or form, it will be in showing mercy.

In mercy, He sends *rain on the just and the unjust*, and makes the *sun to shine on both the evil and the good*.

In mercy, He did more than “go the extra mile” - He came down to earth from heaven, into time from eternity. And when He did so, He gave much more than the clothes off His back (though He did that); He gave His very flesh and bones to death on the cross for the life of the world.

In mercy, He did not resist, but turned His cheeks to those who struck Him and mocked Him.

In mercy, He gave to all who begged Him, and still is.

In mercy, He loved sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, and those for whom society has no room, and still does.

And in the midst of all that, most of all, in mercy He utters those words not one of us could be here without: *Father, forgive them* (Luke 23:34).

That's mercy. Jesus showed us that's the kind of God and Father we have. And this is how our Father wants us to be. Like Father, like sons.

But He didn't just command us to do these things (though He did) - He has done even more: He has given you His very Spirit. St. Paul told the Corinthians, “*You are temples of God's Spirit.*” Living, mobile temples. Given new life and the Spirit of God in Holy Baptism. That you live not according to the spirit and wisdom of the world, but have the mind of Jesus. That you live in mercy and so show yourselves to be sons of God. Sons of the merciful one.

Or, to put that in other words that we heard today, **that you be holy**. For holiness is not just that you don't do anything wrong - it's to be *set apart* for something right. It's to be set apart to be different. To be set apart *for mercy*. That as living, mobile temples of the Spirit of God, you take God's mercy to others - both in the church and out into the world.

So what's the problem? Why aren't you and I holy? Why aren't we merciful? Why are we so quick to accuse and slow to forgive? So ready to criticize and demand and so often reluctant to help? So suspicious of others and so slow to be merciful? Why instead of being different, do we so blend in with the world and its spirit and not look more like Jesus? Why aren't we: like Father, like sons?

Yeah, we're sinners. That's true, but too general.

Yeah, there's a lot of bad people out there, that just might want to take advantage of you and put you up on a cross. That's true, too. And maybe you've felt crucified lately.

But really, let's cut to the chase. If Jesus said, "***You therefore must be perfect***" - the Old Testament reading from Leviticus said ***holy***, and Luke uses the word *merciful* (Luke 6:36), but the point is the same . . . If Jesus said, "***You therefore must be perfect (or holy or merciful), as your heavenly Father is perfect and holy and merciful***" . . . there's the answer: we're not holy and perfect, because we don't believe that our Father is holy and perfect and merciful.

Oh, we do but we don't. We say it. We confess it. But we don't believe it.

We struggle to believe it.

We struggle to believe that what our Father is doing and giving is perfect and right for us, and so we go after what we think is.

We struggle to believe He will really provide, and so we keep and hold back from others.

We're afraid and struggle to believe He will protect, and so we strike out at others.

We don't believe He is leading and guiding and directing, that His Word is enough, and so we follow the wisdom of the world instead.

We struggle to believe that everything our Father is doing - *everything* - is good. Some, sure, yes. But all? You've got to be kidding!

Have you seen my life lately? Have you taken a look at the world lately?

You see, this is the very nature of sin, Luther rightly said. That we don't fear, love, and trust in God above *all* things. We believe what we see and trust what we feel instead of believing and trusting the words and promises of God.

This is the real reason we need to repent. Not just of our wrong actions and words, which is normally our focus, although that would keep us busy enough the rest of our lives! But of our wrong belief. That we have doubted our Father's love. That we have questioned

His goodness. That we have denied His mercy. We need to repent and begin to think differently, with hearts and minds shaped not by what the world says is the way things should be; but with hearts and minds shaped by the Word and Spirit of God. To believe that He has given me the spouse and family (or the singleness) that is perfect for me, and the house and job that is perfect for me, and has led me to the church and community that is perfect for me. We see the imperfections in these things and want better, not realizing (or believing) that our Father has given us what is not only good for us, but *perfect* for us. *Exactly what you need.*

Maybe you don't understand that all right now. I don't either. That's why we must *believe* it. That our Father, who is merciful, *always*, and who knows a bit more than we do, is doing what is perfect for you and me. And that He will continue to do so - not because we deserve it, because we don't. But because that's who He is. Our merciful God: Creator *and* Redeemer *and* Sanctifier.

I saw a commercial the other day for a car company who said that they were *the relentless pursuit of perfection*. I think we could say, that's who our God is, too . . . *but here's the difference*: He doesn't just demand it - He doesn't just say: *Be perfect, or else!* The perfection He demands, He gives. For He gave His Son that we be perfect. He gave His Son that we be forgiven - every imperfection, every sin, every failure, every misbelief - forgiven. He gave His Son that we have life. He gave His Son! What we could never do, He did, for you. You want to know God? That's God. As we sang in the Introit: A God *Merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love* (Psalm 103:8).

And, you know, sometimes that love is going to come through fire. Through trials and troubles, hurts and pains, great difficulties. You have these. But these are not signs that God does not love you. On the contrary, they are signs that He does. For as St. Paul said, through these we see that what He builds is truly precious - of gold and silver; and that He burns off anything we, of our own, have built, which really isn't worth very much. And while that's hard and not very much fun, it is merciful. For where would you be without it? How lost would you be? How far away would you be? Where would your faith be?

Your Father, in His love, wants you. *More than you know*. And so He is building. And what is built by His Word and Spirit lasts not just for this life, but for eternal life. And then also in those times of difficulty, we are given *opportunities* - not only to receive His mercy and forgiveness from others, but to give them to others. To turn the other cheek. To go the extra mile. To love and pray for those who hate us. And more. To be the blessing He would have us be for others. That's not easy. But it is good. And merciful. Like Father, like sons.

And so today, your Saviour has come, once again, to do what He always does - to mercy

you, to forgive you, to Spirit you, to Body and Blood you. So that the word He spoke from the cross - "*It is finished*" - that it be finished in you. That you be perfect. For those two words - finished and perfect - are, in fact, *the same word in the Greek*. What Jesus completed, finished, on the cross, is your perfection. What you need. And what He gives to you here. Mercy, forgiveness, life, salvation. All that you need. *It is finished*, for you. *It is finished*, that you may live. *It is finished*, that you may now mercy others.

For, as St. Paul wrote, ***you are Christ's, and Christ is God's***. And so in Christ, God is your Father, and you are His sons. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to be different. Do not be afraid to be who you are.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.