

Mercy & Grace

Interpretation: Part 4 “Mercy & Grace”

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael – July 31, 2022

8th Sunday After Pentecost

Readings: Leviticus 20:10; Galatians 2:15-21; John 8:2-11

Reflection: Psalm 23

Greeting: The Lord has told us what is good and right. The Lord requires of us that we are to do justice. The Lord our God calls us to love kindness. We are to walk humbly with our God! Praise the Lord! (*Micah 6:8*)

Prayer: O God, our Guide and Guardian, you have led us away from the stress and the strain of the world to be in your peaceful presence. Grant us grace to worship you in Spirit and in truth. May we find comfort in your love and may you build us up by your faith. Enable us to do the work that you have called us to, without fear of failure or hesitation to do good. May we worship you, not just with our lips this hour, but in word and deed all the days of our lives; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. (Psalm 24 NRSVue)*

We read the words of Psalm 23 and hear words of comfort. That will take care of us when we follow him. That no matter what we face, we need not fear what we face with the Lord. We hear of how God's mercy will always be with us and that we will always be with God. What is something that gives you comfort in the Lord? What is a way that you share that comfort with others? Does God give you assurance in all that you do? Do you strive to help others feel that same assurance? What do the words of the 23rd Psalm mean to you personally? How do we celebrate God together?

Prayer: O God, you are our hope and our praise. Help us to seek your wisdom in all that we are and do. May we be strengthened by your steadfast love and faithfulness as we come before you in prayer this day. Help us Lord, that you lift us up in both our joys and our sorrows. Be with us in both our laughter and our tears. May your light guide us and lead us to life everlasting, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today comes from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our first reading for today comes from Leviticus chapter 20 verse 10.

“If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. (Leviticus 20:10 NRSVue)*

Our next reading for today comes from Galatians chapter 2 verses 15 through 21.

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not gentile sinners, yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing. (Galatians 2:15-21 NRSVue)*

Our final reading for today comes from the gospel according to John chapter 8 verses 2 through 11.

Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and, making her stand before all of them, they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” (John 8:2-11 NRSVue)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Today's message gives us another look at the way that Christ changes our understanding of the Old Testament law through interpretation. This one is actually a pretty major shift, and the reason I say that is that in many ways, it is a complete departure from the law. Some might object to that statement, saying that it somehow would infer that the letter of the law is being changed. With that, I would say no, it's being changed through interpretation. And the reason that matters is that we can get into a sort of pedantic argument about whether or not the law has been changed. And it can cause us to miss seeing exactly what's going on here. And so, I highlight this difference because it helps us to sidestep those frivolous discussions, because the letter of the law isn't being changed as much as it is the interpretation of how the law should be enacted and lived out. We began with a rather short section of Leviticus 20. The selection is short because I simply wanted to highlight the specific law in question in our Gospel reading. When two people commit adultery, both shall be put to death. Pretty straightforward. Now in Galatians, we get an interpretation of the law through Christ. Paul tells us that righteousness doesn't come through the law. Paul instead focuses on the grace of God. Part of what Paul is saying here is that the law is not what will justify someone, the law will not bring salvation, but Paul repeats an oft heard idea for us: that if we have died in Christ, we are risen in Christ, and it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us. Paul shifts emphasis away from the law onto grace, mercy, and Christ

Now, when we read our main reading for today, the gospel account from John, we have what would have been a rather awkward situation for everyone involved. Jesus is sitting down to teach. Then the scribes and the Pharisees bring a woman caught in adultery. Now, I've talked about this before, and I will forever note the oddity of this situation. Because bringing one person caught in adultery is a supremely odd thing since it's something that takes two people. And as we read before and Leviticus both are guilty. And so we already get the suspicion that this is some sort of elaborate setup from the get go, because it starts with a situation that is odd in and of itself that doesn't feel right at all. But they come before Jesus with what's supposed to be a trap. The Pharisees and scribes say that the woman was caught in adultery and that the law of Moses says they should stone her to death. They want to know what Jesus says to this. They want to catch him either violating the law of Moses or the law of Rome. They just want to catch him somehow. If he's going to have grace and mercy and show love, he's going to have to reject the law of Moses. But if he doesn't reject the law of Moses, he's going to have to reject both mercy and Roman law, which prevents them from carrying out the execution. It is meant to be an easy win. So, they push and push, and eventually Jesus responds to them. He says that if you have no sins, throw the first stone. He then goes back to writing on the ground. And everyone leaves. Everyone wanders away, except for the woman they brought before Christ. And Jesus says that if nobody else has condemned her then he won't condemn her either.

Now, I wanted to look at this when we look at interpretation because this brings up a rather interesting part of interpreting the law. The letter of the law still exists, but enforcing it is now a very different matter. Jesus interprets in a way that changes the focus and does make it impossible to enforce the condemnation by stoning. We see mercy and grace in action with this interpretation. That if somebody is going to take a life, let them be someone without sin. And that's pretty hefty. Because who is going to be able to carry out judgment? I know I'm not. Nobody facing the woman they brought before Jesus is willing. There's an idea here that we must first be willing to condemn ourselves before we can condemn anyone else. If we can hold ourselves up as blameless then we may begin to condemn others. But if anything causes us to condemn ourselves, then we must condemn ourselves first. Now, one might interpret that as saying that we should pass judgment on ourselves and punish ourselves before anyone else and that would also miss the larger point being made. And that is that when Jesus finishes this he asks if anyone could condemn her. When she says no, Christ looks at her and says he won't either. If there is no one left to pass judgment, then he will not condemn if they cannot. That is the core of everything in this interpretation. When I read this, I see Jesus showing that mercy and grace are at the core of God's love. That God's love isn't about judgment and condemnation and punishment. That if we are to condemn each other, we are truly condemning ourselves first. And that Christ is there to say that he's not condemning us, because he's here to save us. He's not here to punish but to set us free from the chains of bondage that hold us through sin and death. And that we shouldn't hang ourselves on the law as much as we should live a life of love.

Now, one of the mistakes that we can make with this is by limiting it. What do I mean by that? It's easy to read this and hold it in light of one thing. We could say that Jesus gives this response about adultery, so that must be the only thing that it covers. Because of that, we should leave everything else out. The reality is that Jesus is holding up the law as a whole and asking us how we are actually going to live up to the law. If you too are transgressors, how do you plan on upholding the law? If you too have violated the law, how does it make you righteous enough to condemn others? How does one find justice in hypocrisy? How does it serve anyone if the law is used selectively? The law becomes a tool for keeping others down instead of a way to find justice, and when used that way shows the utmost hypocrisy and lack of grace and mercy. And if we are hypocrites, we are not fully living up to the ideal of God's love. And that's the biggest takeaway for me. We have a choice to make in our lives, whether we will live by law and judgment or whether we will live by grace and mercy. Whether we feel that we are called to condemn others in place of God or whether we are called to love others on behalf of God. The choice that we make is if we cling to the law or if we cling to Christ. Do we live and die by the law? Or are we living in Christ because we have died in Christ and are risen in Christ? Because for the life of me, I can't figure out how to make those two things go together. If I have to choose, I will choose living in Christ. I will choose the path of love. I will choose to try my best to be merciful. I will try to be full of grace. Because rather than condemn by the law, I would rather be completed by the love of Christ. And I pray that we may all find peace

and comfort knowing that our God is a God who desires mercy and not sacrifice. A God who requires love and not condemnation. That we may know God's steadfast love that endures forever through life in our risen Savior. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Interpretation

Our current series will be looking at the ways that we interpret Scripture. Each week will be a different lesson that will look at the Old and New Testament and what we learn about them both through Christ.

Prayer List

Rev Charliam Renner	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup Ambulance Crew		Eric Veach	Ed & Verna Titus
Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney	Nancy Hoke
Family of Don Wells	Tricia Adkins	Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead
Dwight Parsons	Lauren Stewart	Phyllis Gabel	Sage Martin
Dalton McFarland	Ruth Ann Finley	Jodie Bunch	Tom Finley
Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor	Susie Callahan	Kenny Holmes
Chuck Hogan	Brittany Gilbert	Jackie Potter	Don Holsapple
Family of Loise Roberts	Jeremy Klinger	Phil Hawickhorst	
Richard Durham	Kathy Hanks	Wayne Carrell	Gary & Mary Winterrowd
Leo Smith	Sue & Bob Smyser	Larry Thompson	Nick & Leana Ochoa
Family of Bunny Sparks	Greg Williams	Martha Roberts	Charlie & Charlotte Baxter
Paul Schulte			

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