

✚ I preach in God's name for God's people. Let my words be from God and for God's people. **Amen**

Good morning.

The seventy-two disciples from last week returned *with great joy and with great success* — even the demons submitted to them in the name of Jesus! Yet how did Jesus respond to their joy? He said; “Do not rejoice in *that*, but rejoice rather *that your names are written in heaven.*”

The return of the seventy-two would have drawn a crowd. And so, it's worth noting that Jesus said publicly — to these disciples and the crowd who gathered around — that the names of these seventy-two were written in heaven. If you had happened to have been in that crowd, you would have been wondering: *What about me? How do I get my name written in heaven?*

This is the question our lawyer asks Jesus. Our lawyer might have some other questions in mind, too — questions like, *Just how does Jesus know these men's names are written in heaven? What gives Jesus the right to say that?*

This is not a contract lawyer or a market acquisitions lawyer. This lawyer is *Torah* lawyer — a man who knows the first five books of the Bible, which contained the laws of religion and state. There was no distinction in Judah between *religious law* and *state law*. So these laws speak about sacrifices and religious festivals, and also about the value of property and matters of disputes. This man knows about all of this. And so, this lawyer sees that Jesus has told the seventy-two their names are written in heaven, and assumes that he will easily trap Jesus in the law. If Jesus can tell these men that their names are in heaven, what will he tell the lawyer? And so, he asks: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?*

Jesus parries; he turns the question back to the lawyer: *What does the law say?* Now the lawyer must prove his stuff. The lawyer is on the defense. Will he get his own question right? He gets to the heart of the law: *love the Lord God with everything; love your neighbor as yourself.* So far, so good. And Jesus commends him: “*You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.*”

Notice that this is exactly what the seventy-two had just returned from doing. They loved Jesus and put him and his mission above their comfort, above their responsibilities, and above their relationships. They brought nothing with them. With no money, no overnight bag, no supplies, the seventy-two traveled from town to town, and they cared for their *neighbors*. They cared for the *afflicted* — just as the lawyer is about to hear the Good Samaritan do.

We hear the story of the Good Samaritan, because the lawyer believes he has one more move on the chess board. Even though Jesus has parried his first trap, and even though Jesus has commended him, the lawyer is not ready to give up, and so he tries to set one more trap. He asks: *Who is my neighbor?* Jesus responds with our beloved story:

A man is robbed, beaten, half-dead, left to die on the side of the road. What will become of him? Will anyone find him? *Unlikely.* He will die if not. And yet — a priest comes. Surely, the priest will stop and help this man! Isn't this what priests are for? To intercede for the people to God? To offer themselves in service to God? But the priest doesn't stop. In fact, he crosses the road to the other side. He walks by. Next a Levite comes. Surely, the Levite will stop! If not a priest, a Levite is the next best thing — priests come from the tribe of the Levites. But the Levite doesn't stop either. He crosses the road to the other side. He walks by. Will anyone find this man and help him?

A Samaritan arrives. We learn from John's Gospel (4:9) that Jews do not associate with Samaritans. A Samaritan is therefore the *least likely* to help a Jew. And yet, this Samaritan stops. The Samaritan does not merely talk to the man, or wait with the man, but he cares for the man. He pours wine on his wounds to cleanse them; he pours oil on his wounds to dress them. And then he places him on his animal, and he takes him to the inn, and he pays

for his food and for his stay — two day's wages, and perhaps enough for two months of care! He will cover any additional cost.

The story now over, Jesus turns to the lawyer, and again, asks him to answer his own question. *Tell me, Jesus says, which of the three men was a neighbor?* The lawyer responds, *the one who showed mercy.* Again, Jesus gives his answer: *And as you go, do the same.* Do mercy.

What makes this story so beautiful? The man, left for dead, is revived by someone completely unexpected. The men who should have helped him, didn't — perhaps they were too occupied by their comforts, their responsibilities, their relationship. The Samaritan put those things aside for the sake of a man, who under typical circumstances, would have been *at least* unfriendly, not even associating with him. This unfriendliness, this refusing to associate, went both ways between Jews and Samaritans.

The lawyer has been, again, outmaneuvered. With a masterclass in rhetoric, Jesus dismantled any pushback on what the extent of mercy the lawyer was to extend. With clinical pointedness, Jesus dismantles any argument that *this person* or *that person* is not the lawyer's responsibility. The one whom the lawyer encounters is his neighbor and his responsibility. There is no longer getting out of it for him.

Neither will we escape this responsibility. The beauty of this story cloaks its offensiveness. We, like the lawyer, might have a similar approach to our neighbor. Of course I love my neighbor — just not *him!* And then, after hearing this story, we might still think something like: but Jesus surely couldn't have meant *him!* Surely, Jesus couldn't mean that *she* is my neighbor, for whom I owe responsibility and care! Ah, but Jesus does mean this.

Jesus meant this mercy, lived this mercy, and went to the cross to demonstrate this mercy. When we take a moment to reflect, we see that Jesus shows a deeper and richer mercy *by becoming like the half-dead, beaten man* — becoming not half-dead, but fully dead; being abandoned not just by robbers, but also by his friends; showing mercy not just to one enemy, but to all of his enemies. Indeed, Jesus has extended his mercy to us — mercy we hear in *the absolution*, and mercy we taste in *Holy Communion*.

What shall we do with the mercy Jesus has extended to each of us? What will we do with the mercy Jesus has commanded us to extend to our neighbor?

We don't have the option to opt out of this mercy. *Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.* We have been forgiven. This is a gift meant to be shared, not a gift meant to put in a safe, never to be seen again. We do not want to refuse mercy to others, lest we infringe on the mercy we have received. We do not want to refuse mercy to others, lest we withhold from them the joy we ourselves have received.

We might try to still put up a fight: "But Lord, you don't understand what he did! Or— You don't understand how she doesn't deserve mercy!" But these are lies, plain and simple. Of course Jesus understands what he and she did, what you and I have done. He went to the cross *for you* and *for me*. That was the point.

We don't hear what happens next in the life of the lawyer. We don't find out if he has taken Jesus' words to heart; we don't find out if he has begun to put this mercy into practice; we don't find out if he was one of the men who refused mercy, who yelled, "Crucify him!" and sentenced Jesus to death. We don't find out if he came to faith in Jesus after this. We simply do not know. We shall find out at the end of this age, when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead.

We cannot know how the lawyer responded. But we can take what Jesus told the lawyer to heart. We can, as we go, do mercy.

When we hear the story of the Good Samaritan, we perhaps think of the incredible individuals who have saved peoples' lives, or have put their own lives at risk, or have even given their lives for the stranger. We may think of the *Good Samaritan* laws that have been passed, preventing lawsuits so that those who try to help the afflicted are not unjustly punished. We may think of individuals whom we have encountered from time to time, individuals

we may have helped, or individuals we may have crossed over to the other side of the road to avoid. But on this Sunday, I want to draw attention not to the *unknown* neighbor whom we may meet, but to the neighbors who are constantly and consistently in our midst.

After all, where is the best place to *go and do the same*? Where is the single best place to begin putting this mercy into practice? Is there any better place for *doing mercy* than in your own home? For is it not the home where we pray, daily, *Forgive my trespasses, as I forgive those who trespass against me*?

The home is the best place for this mercy to be practiced. Think back, again, on the seventy-two who were sent out. These thirty-six pairs were to go from town-to-town until someone from a town *received* them into their home. Then, this person would provide them beds and food, supplies and clothing, making sure they lacked nothing while they remained with them. These pairs of men extended mercy to the afflicted and to the demon-possessed; those who hosted them extended these men the mercy of their homes.

Mercy does not equal approval. We need only return to Christ's mercy towards us on the cross. Did Jesus *approve* of those who yelled, "Crucify him!"? Or of those who beat him or stripped him? Or of the one who betrayed him? Or of those who abandoned him? Or of those who carried out his crucifixion? Did Jesus *approve* of any of these actions? No! Nevertheless, Jesus extended mercy to *any of these* who would receive it. Christ's death was so stunning, his mercy so great, that a centurion nearby expressed faith *at the death of Jesus*: "Surely this man was the son of God!"

When we extend mercy to those whom we love, this too will begin to be said of us: "Surely he is a son of God! Surely she is a daughter of God!"

In the life to come, all those who have put their hope in the Lord will be delivered, and will dwell with the Lord Jesus forever, as sons and daughters of God. All of us will therefore be brothers and sisters together, one family, united in God's Spirit. We do not therefore want to neglect extending mercy to our very brothers and sisters, those who have gathered for worship in this sanctuary. Look around, these are the very people you will be spending eternity with.

In fact, the eternity we spend together is, as far as I can tell, an eternal wedding feast. Hear again John's words from Revelation:

*for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his Bride has made herself ready;
& it was granted her to clothe herself
with fine linen, bright and pure"*

The Bride spoken of here is the Church — the people of God. The Lord Jesus weds his people, clothes her in beauty, makes her good and righteous and truthful. Here, in this Great Wedding, is the foundation for all marriage, the foundation for that good given long ago, when the woman was formed from the man, and the two became one. Marriage is good and beautiful and holy estate, for it foreshadows this Great Wedding Feast.

And so — for those who are married — is there any better way to fulfill your marital vows than to be the one who *does* mercy in your marriage? Is there any better way for fidelity in marriage than caring for a spouse, pouring out wine for wounds and oil for dressing, providing for food and for stay, pouring out forgiveness and mercy, and committing to caring — no matter the cost? Isn't marriage worthy of mercy, day after day, year after year, until death parts?

*I, [name], take you, [name of bride/groom], to be my wedded [wife/husband], to have and to hold from this day forward,
for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.*

There are several beautiful examples in this congregation of spouses showing exactly this mercy to one another — as their bodies and minds *falter* and *fail*. But perhaps there are also spouses who have begun to be embittered towards one another, who have stopped extending mercy.

And so, I turn to you — pour out mercy in your homes. If you have been withholding mercy to your spouse, to your children, to your family, to those who are nearest you, then it is time to *stop withholding mercy* and instead *begin* pouring out God's mercy upon your spouse, your children, your family, upon all those who enter your home.

Doing mercy in the home is not, of course, limited to just those who are married. In fact, it is in the Church that those who are widowed, and those who are single, are elevated as equals — for in the kingdom of God we are brothers and sisters together, children of God together, the Bride of Christ together.

And so in this church, at Emmanuel Lutheran, let us, together, be a people of mercy. Let us pour out mercy first in our homes. For it this very mercy we have already received from Jesus which will one day, make all of us together, *home* in heaven with the Lord.

✝ All Glory be to God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and forever, Amen.