

Pastor Troy E. Medli
7th Sunday of Epiphany, Year C
2/20/2022
Grace, River Forest

The Miracle of Mercy

Beloved in Christ, I offer you these words in the name of the Most High God. The one whose forgiveness flows like a never-ending stream and whose mercy knows no bounds. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

"I knew the only way to get past what had happened so that it would no longer dictate my life was to forgive him." Matthew and Tim told The Forgiveness Project.

There is the story of Jean Paul Samputu, maybe you've heard it before. This is how it is told by The Forgiveness project. Three years prior to the Rwandan genocide, Jean Paul Samputu, at the time a rising star on the East African music scene, spent six months in jail alongside thousands of other Tutsis who had been arrested in their homes. The jails were overflowing, so the government finally released the prisoners but the situation grew increasingly tense. In April 1994 over a 100-day period, nearly one million Rwandan Tutsis lost their lives at the hands of their fellow Rwandans, the Hutus. Among the dead were several of Jean Paul's family. After the genocide he returned to his village and found out that one of the people that were killed was his father: by someone named Vincint, a friend of their family. As this truth sunk in he says his life changed forever. The shock was so great, he says, I wanted to take revenge. I wanted to kill Vincent. But I couldn't find him, and so I started killing myself. He lived with anger and bitterness among other things, until, as he describes it, a miracle happened. Peace came over him. I was ready to do it, he says. He was able to forgive Vince. ¹

The Forgiveness Project, whose founding patron was Desmond Tutu, collects these modern day miracle stories. Testimonies of forgiveness and mercy in a world that is so often ruled by reaction, retribution, and revenge.

Another story you might expect to find among its archives is that of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph is Jacob's favorite son fit with that robe and all. His brothers are envious and resentful and sell him into slavery in Egypt. He rises in the ranks and reaches the height of royalty. All these years later Joseph and his brothers meet again. Dismayed in his presence I can imagine what they must have thought was coming. We know how the world works. How we are trained to

¹ <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories-library/jean-paul-samputu/>

respond in situations like this. And yet, he speaks to them and says, “Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.” Joseph weeps and kisses them. Against all expectations he lavishes mercy and forgiveness upon them. It is the most unlikely encounter. The most surprising outcome. A miracle. An event that serves as an interruption to the narratives that Joseph’s brothers knew too well. It was a disruption that placed them in a new and more spacious place. They found themselves in a space where the past had lost its grip on them and the future was opened up as an endless vista.

We find ourselves back again in a familiar and spacious landscape. With Jesus and the disciples. His life and ministry ahead of us.

The leveling sermon on the plain that began last week with unexpected upside down pronouncements of blessing and woes continues. Jesus now begins to unfurl for us a portrait of what the reign of God looks like in practice. What the Kingdom of God he came to bring looks like in flesh and blood.

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.

Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.

Give to everyone who begs.

If anyone takes your goods, do not ask for them again.

Do not just lend to those you know can repay you.

Do not judge, do not condemn, and forgive, and you will be forgiven.

And, Jesus’ imperative to *be merciful, as your Father is merciful*.

These exhortations themselves are all rooted and find their animating power, there, in that expansive mercy of God for you. Devoid of that mercy these are simply demands that weigh us down because we could never embody them perfectly in all times and all places.

We must travel a little further in Luke to see the mercy of God fully personified. From the plain to the hill. There on Calvary Jesus loves and does good to those who hate him. Blesses those who curse him and he turns the other cheek when he is struck. Forgiving his enemies. Speaking “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Jesus does not retaliate or get revenge. Jesus does not react. He shows mercy till the end. There, Jesus is engaged in the ultimate forgiveness project for our sake. He bears the weight of sin and evil and all of their ensnaring schemes. Vindictive reaction, retaliation, revenge just to name a few. He goes down into death. There they are defeated. Not even the grave could hold him for long. The mercy of God in Christ himself is on the move again. How wide in scope is this project? It has expanded far and wide until it reaches you. In your baptism a miracle of mercy occurred. You were forgiven of all of your sins: past, present, and future, and the things you have done and failed to do have no sway over you any longer. A freedom that the world cannot buy is yours forever and the future has

opened up before you as an endless vista. The clutter cleared out of our hearts and minds possibilities begin to blossom.

The life-giving Spirit that Paul speaks of has now taken up residence inside of us. With that Spirit as our guide, fed by word and meal in community, chains loosened and hearts lighter, we now come again to the words of Jesus' sermon. No longer cold duty, these teachings are delightful invitations to the work that we have been entrusted to. Discipleship as gift and vocation.

On the other side of our miracle we join in this forgiveness project as children of the most high God. We've tasted freedom so we do not want to put ourselves back into bondage, holding grudges or refusing to forgive. That only places chains back on ourselves and makes our hearts bitter. We find blessing in blessing others. We turn the other cheek because we have already been vindicated in Jesus name. Judging others is no longer what we do for we know that we are all in the hands of God, whose judgment is mercy. As co-workers in this kingdom we even learn to love our enemies as God has already done in Christ.

This project that we find ourselves a part of is the endeavor of a lifetime. A calling we live out in many ways and in many places wherever God may lead us. We get to be the hands and feet and voice of the project oftentimes. Yet, the results are always up to God, who is directing the effort. God is the one who works the miracle. For Tim and Matthew, for Jean Paul, for Joseph and his brothers, for you and me.