

## God's Mercy Leads to Rejoicing 16 Pentecost C

“An eye for eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life,” is a teaching still heard among extremist groups today. Out of fear of an increasingly violent society we want to be protected from people like them. In the face of pure evil, when life is wantonly taken, and repeat offenders are released from prison only to commit more crime the argument for the death penalty plays on the emotions as last year's elections did in Wisconsin.

One can argue that no side wins: the victim, the perpetrator and society lose when violence is used to overcome violence. Violence is still an unproven deterrent to crime and war.

In The Art of War, written instructions by the Chinese General, Sun Tzu, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. taught that the best battle fought is the one that can be avoided. Notable figures of history such as Napoleon and American generals in Operation Desert Storm were said to have been influenced by the book. Much of its thirteen chapters give tips on how to outsmart one's opponent so that physical battle is not necessary. As such, it has found application as a training guide for many competitive endeavors that do not involve actual combat including business, television, theater and sports. The Art of War is required reading for many executives of Japanese companies.

One of the tips given in chapter 2, **Waging War**, states, “The captives should be treated kindly and absorbed into the ranks. This is the way of winning the battle and expanding your force at the same time.” Perish any thought that I would equate a visitor to church as a captive! While this concept might not support a theological application of mercy the strategy does point to the idea.

What pastor would not invite a visiting family to join and explore the ministries of a church? In the case of the church assimilating people is the art of aiding them with the war within their souls. Spiritually speaking, we are equipping people to do battle with the forces acting upon them. Instead of a gun however, we arm them with a sword which is the word of God, armor such as righteousness, peace, the journey of salvation and service that glorifies God. When we equip people in this way and educate them we are praying that they may never have to fight the Adversary – Satan! All the weapons of spiritual warfare are defensive weapons save one.

It is so interesting that Moses bargains with God in an appeal to God's merciful nature. Rather than destroy your people God consider what the neighbors over in Egypt will say. "It was with evil...that he brought them out to kill them..." Moses in an appeal to God's nature to have mercy gets him to turn from his wrath and change his mind. Moses sought to honor God's reputation as a merciful God.

I can't help but think of a cartoon in such situations! Gary Larson's the Far Side would be extremely funny showing Moses with arms raised, a profusely sweating brow, and God scratching his head with a thunderbolt poised to zap people jumping off the ground as high as they can with the caption, "Okay so they forgot their Nikes?!"

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions." King David, after writing Psalm 51 subsequent to a visit by the prophet Nathan made his appeal to God. An adulterous indiscretion like David's with a soldier's wife would call for courts martial today. David suffered greatly for taking the life of Uriah. In his mourning for the loss of Bathsheba's son and almost losing his throne to his son Absalom David demonstrated that receiving mercy does not always remove consequences.

St. Paul wrote that "he received mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief." He thought he was doing God a favor by persecuting perceived heretics such as Stephen. He said that he, Paul, was made an example as "the foremost" of sinners, so others might come to faith in Jesus Christ. No where does Paul write that God was compelled to have mercy on him. Rather God pursued Paul to reveal His patience and that His will is that no one would perish eternally.

Jesus in our gospel reveals the heart of God in the matter of showing mercy. His desire is to see people change their minds. Just like the lost sheep that is found, or the lost coin that is recovered, our Savior would have us know that there is "joy in the presence of the angels of God when one sinner repents." Mercy leads to God's rejoicing. Punishment leads to His grief. Of the latter statement I do not doubt. Just as a human parent that must visit a child in prison weeps, God weeps as we do when our souls are captive and hellbent. The God who in Jesus Christ wept over the whole city of Jerusalem forseeing its future destruction, weeps over one lost soul.

May God give us hearts that are burdened for people that turn their backs on Him and their own families. May God give us

compassion to reach out to them, the love to pursue and seek their soul's freedom – is that not salvation?

Let us pray: Eternal Father, strong to save, bind the evil one that seeks to destroy the lost among us. When we give up hope of ever seeing these lives change remind us of Moses who interceded on behalf of his people. Remind us of David who though he suffered for his sin continued to be your choice of heritage to bring the Savior into our world. Remind us of Paul who became an example of your mercy to all that would hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. And remind us of Him, who said, "God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son, that whoever would believe in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Thank you Lord for your mercy. Amen