

OCTOBER 1, 2017

ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

LUKE 6: 31-36

“HAVING MERCY”

The 20th century British writer W. Somerset Maugham wrote a book towards the end of his life all about his life. It's not a full autobiography but he recounts various episodes and things that happened to him. He entitled it The Summing Up. One story he tells is about his grandfather whose house he often visited. His grandfather had a bad temper. Maugham gives an example.....

One day there was some kind of special family gathering at the grandfather's house and everyone was sitting at the big dining room table for dinner—the main courses were English roast beef and baked potatoes. The grandfather took a bite of a baked potato and it was immediately obvious that he thought it hadn't been prepared properly. You could see from his face that his bad temper was about to explode. Then he suddenly stood up and grabbed the platter containing the potatoes. He proceeded very methodically to throw each potato, one at a time, at one of the family member portraits on the four walls of the room. He had a good aim----each potato smashed into one of the paintings. When he was all done he sat down and calmly ate his meal. (The Summing Up, W. Somerset Maugham, Penguin, 1946, p. 10)

That is one way to handle anger----just let it flow, let it all out! Many people do handle it that way. Some people seem to be mad about something or other just about all the time.

But in today's gospel reading from Luke 6, our Lord Jesus Christ tells us a better way. Our assigned reading today, Luke 6:31-36, is a little part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the greatest sermon ever preached.

And most of the content of the Lord's sermon teaches the opposite of what we consider normal.

It is normal behavior that if someone curses us, we curse them back (even if maybe just under our breath). But in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says we should bless them instead. As we read in verse 28---“bless those who curse you.” Not normal!

It is normal behavior that if someone takes something from us, we try to get it back.....and perhaps have them punished for taking it. But in the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord says just the opposite. He says we should let them have what they took, plus give them more. As Christ said in verse 30---“Of him who takes away your goods, do not ask for them back.” And then in verse 31---“Of him who takes away your cloak, give your coat as well”. Not normal!

It is normal for people to think that the poor are most unfortunate and that the rich are very fortunate indeed. But in the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord says the opposite. He

says the poor are blessed, and the rich are to be pitied. He said in verse 20---“Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” And in verse 24---“Woe to you that are rich....” Not normal!

Jesus Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, turns normal thinking inside out and upside down. But, then, Jesus was usually quite unusual! Think about it: He was the King of all the universe, yet He chose to be born in a stable with cows and sheep. When it was time for Him to start His Church, did He choose the great philosophers and the best leaders and generals to head it up? No, He picked some poor, uneducated fishermen. Even though the “most religious” person possible, He hung around with sinners, not priests. He is the most powerful and good man ever, obviously---and He died hanging on a cross with criminals on each side. And once they killed Him, He really did something unusual---He refused to stay in His tomb!

So, if in the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord turns normal thinking upside down, we shouldn't be surprised. It was normal for Jesus to not be normal.

There are lots of things to cover in the Sermon on the Mount! Even lots in the short segment of it in today's gospel reading. But we'll just look at one verse---Luke 6:36. “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” Just a few words, but a lot in those few words-----“Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”

As in most of the Sermon on the Mount, here the Lord does overturn our normal way of thinking. If someone angers us, offends us, hurts us, what is our normal reaction? To defend our rights, to get upset, to try and get even, maybe even to get revenge. But what does Jesus say? “Be merciful.” We should forgive and have mercy on those who have hurt us. “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” In other words, be more like God. And isn't God merciful to us?

As Orthodox, what is our most frequent prayer? We've already prayed it quite a few times this morning..... “Lord, have mercy.” So if we are always asking God to have mercy on us, shouldn't we have mercy on others?

One important way to do better at having mercy on others is to not judge them. There was a man who was driving home from work one day in a very good mood. He saw a hitchhiker by the road and decided to give him a lift. The fellow got in the front seat and the man continued on his way. After he drove a while, he began to worry and have bad thoughts about the hitchhiker. He was dressed rather seedily and just didn't seem like a nice fellow. The driver wondered if he was safe.....and then he thought about his wallet. He usually kept it in his suit coat pocket and the coat was folded and sitting in the middle of the front seat, next to him.....and also right next to the hitchhiker! Now he got scared and reached over to pat the suit---no wallet in the pocket! Now he got mad! How dare that hitchhiker steal his wallet? He pulled over to the side of the road and angrily yelled at the hitchhiker, “Hand over the wallet right now! And then get out!” The hitchhiker, looking very surprised, said, “I don't know what you're talking about!” The driver said, “Don't argue with me-----just hand over the wallet and leave!” The hitchhiker dug into his pants pocket and brought out a wallet which he gave the driver. Then he opened up the door and ran away. The driver headed for home rather proud of himself for accurately judging the hitchhiker to be a thief and happy that he'd gotten his wallet back. He went into his house

and his wife said, “You know, I forgot to call you---but you left your wallet on the kitchen table this morning.” And she handed him a wallet. The man looked at in stunned silence---it sure looked like his wallet! Then he pulled out the wallet the hitchhiker had handed over to him and opened it up. There was the driver’s license with a picture---of the hitchhiker! He had been so busy judging the hitchhiker to be a thief that he had himself actually stolen the hitchhiker’s wallet! (in “Our Daily Bread”, 10/2/92)

Judging others is not wise. Maybe the person you’re judging is actually innocent? Or maybe they have some guilt, but there might be extenuating circumstances you don’t even know about. Or maybe that person really is wrong, but even then it’s not our job to judge. Judging is God’s job, not yours or mine. So we should leave that to God. Instead of judging, we should obey Christ’s words in verse 36---“Have mercy.”

What if God acted towards us as we often act towards others? What if He never gave us a break, never had mercy on us? We’d all end up in hell.

We don’t want that. Instead, we wish to be in God’s presence. Abba Eupreprius said long ago that we can only know the presence of God in our soul if “we do not judge others.” (in The Word In The Desert, Douglas Burton-Christie, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 274)

So we should ask God to help us work on being merciful to others. Think of someone you really don’t like very much, someone that “rubs you the wrong way”, someone that may have angered you somehow.

Go out of your way to be especially nice to him. Speak kindly, do a little favor. Just be nice. Someone who is angry at another person could respond to this by saying, “That’s all backwards. Sure, I’ll be nice to people I like, but why be nice to that guy I can’t stand?” Yes, I know it’s all backwards. Upside down. Just like almost everything the Lord taught in the Sermon on the Mount.

Easy to do? No---hard. It’s *fun* to chat with those we naturally get along with. It’s sometimes *excruciating* to chat with “that guy” or “that woman”. We may have to grit our teeth and force ourselves..... It’s tough. But then we are Christians. And Christians are supposed to do tough things---remember that cross? 1600 years ago, St. Jerome wrote---“To be angry? That’s only human. To *quit* being angry? *That* is Christian.”

If we really try this, asking God’s help, we can do it. And who knows? (No guarantees here---the other person has free will, after all.....). Maybe that not so nice person will get a little nicer. It does happen. Leopards *do* change their spots.

It can work! So your homework assignment---Pick someone you tend not to like much. Have mercy on him. Say something nice, do a little kindness. Think some good things about him instead of what you usually think about him. Pray for him. And if he has upset you.....forgive him. Just like God forgives you when you upset Him.

Then you will be doing your little part to help our Lord Jesus Christ continue what He started doing when He walked among us 2000 years ago---turning the whole world upside down.

As Christ said in today’s gospel reading----“Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” May God have mercy on us as we have mercy on each other.