

20 February 2011
Epiphany 7

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Like Father, Like Sons”

Text: Matthew 5:38-48 (Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; 1 Corinthians 3:10-23)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

What Jesus is talking about today is mercy. For mercy is what our Father in heaven is all about. If you're going to be like Him in any way, shape, or form, it will be in showing mercy.

In mercy, He send rain on the just and the unjust, and makes the sun to shine on both the evil and the good.

In mercy, He did more than “go the extra mile” - He came down to earth from heaven, into time from eternity. And when He did so, He gave much more than the clothes off His back (though He did that); He gave His very flesh and bones to death on the cross for the life of the world.

In mercy, He did not resist, but turned His cheeks to those who struck Him and mocked Him.

In mercy, He gave to all who begged Him, and He promises still to give to all who call upon Him in truth.

In mercy, He loved sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, and those for whom society has no room, and still does.

And in the midst of all that, most of all, in mercy He utters those words not one of us could be here without: *Father, forgive them* (Luke 23:34).

That's mercy. Jesus showed us that's the kind of God and Father we have.

And this is how our Father wants us to be.

Like Father, like sons.

But He didn't just command us to do these things (though He did) - He has done even more: He has given you His very Spirit. St. Paul told the Corinthians, **“You are temples of God's Spirit.”** Living, mobile temples. Given new life and the Spirit of God in Holy Baptism. That you live not according to the spirit and wisdom of the world, but have the mind of Jesus. That you live in mercy and so show yourselves to be sons of God. Sons of the merciful one.

Or, to put that in other words, that you be holy. For holiness is not just that you don't do anything wrong - it's to be *set apart* for something right. It's to be set apart for mercy. That as living, mobile temples of the Spirit of God, you take God's mercy to others - both in the church and out into the world.

So what's the problem? Why aren't you and I holy? Why aren't we merciful? Why are we so quick to accuse and slow to forgive? So ready to criticize and demand and so reluctant to help? So suspicious of others and so slow to be merciful? Why do we so blend in with the world and its spirit and not look more like Jesus? Why aren't we: like Father, like sons?

Yeah, we're sinners. That is true, but too general.

Yeah, there's a lot of bad people out there, that just might want to take advantage of you and put you up on a cross. That's true, too. And maybe you've felt crucified lately.

But let's cut to the chase. If Jesus said, "***You therefore must be perfect***" - the Old Testament reading from Leviticus said ***holy***, and Luke uses the word *merciful* (Luke 6:36), but the point is the same. If Jesus said, "***You therefore must be perfect (or holy or merciful), as your heavenly Father is perfect and holy and merciful,***" there's the answer: we're not holy and perfect, because we don't believe that our Father is holy and perfect and merciful.

Oh, we say it. We confess it. But we don't believe it. Which is why we sin.

We don't believe that what our Father is doing is perfect and right for us, and so we demand what we think is from others.

We don't believe He will really provide, and so we keep and hold back from others.

We don't believe He will protect, and so we strike out at others.

We don't believe He is leading and guiding and directing, that His Word is sufficient, and so we chase after the wisdom of the world.

We don't believe that everything our Father is doing - *everything* - is good. Some, yes. All? You've got to be kidding!

Have you seen my life lately? Have you taken a look at the world lately?

This is the very nature of sin, Luther rightly said. We don't fear, love, and trust in God above *all* things.

We believe what we see and trust what we feel instead of believing and trusting the words and promises of God.

And so, folks, we need to repent.

Not just of our wrong actions and words, although that would keep us busy enough the rest of our lives!

But of our wrong belief. That we have doubted our Father's love. That we have questioned His goodness. That we have denied His mercy. We need to repent and begin to think differently, with hearts and minds shaped not by what the world says is the way things should be; but with hearts and minds shaped by the Word and Spirit of God. To believe that He has given me the spouse and family (or the singleness) that is perfect for me, and the house and job that is perfect for me, and has led me to the church and community that is perfect for me. We see the imperfections in these things and want better, not realizing (or believing) that our Father has given us what is not only good for us, but perfect for us. *Exactly what you need.*

Maybe you don't understand that all right now. I don't either. That's why we *believe* it. That our Father, who is merciful, *always*, and who knows a bit more than we do, is doing what is perfect for you and me. And He will continue to do so - not because we deserve it, because we don't. But because that's who He is. Our merciful God: Creator *and* Redeemer *and* Sanctifier.

There's a car company whose advertising slogan is: *the relentless pursuit of perfection*. I think we could say, that's who our God is, too . . . *but here's the difference*: He doesn't just demand it, He gives it. For He gave His Son that we be perfect - not by what we do and not according to the standards of the world, but in holiness, in mercy. He gave His Son that we be forgiven every imperfection, every sin, every failure. He gave His Son that we have life. He gave His Son! You want to know God? That's God. *Merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love* (Psalm 103:8).

And, you know, sometimes that love is going to come through fire. Through trials and troubles, hurts and pains, great difficulties. You have these. But these are not signs that God does not love you. On the contrary, they are signs that He does. For as St. Paul said, through these we see that what He builds is truly precious - of gold and silver; and that He burns off anything we, of our own, have built, which really isn't worth very much. And while that's hard and not very much fun, where would you be without it? How lost would you be? How far away would you be? Where would your faith be?

Your Father, in His love, wants you. *More than you know*. And so He is building. And what is built by His Word and Spirit lasts not just for this life, but for eternal life. And then also in those times of difficulty, we are given opportunities - not only to receive His mercy and forgiveness from others, but to give them to others. To be the blessing He would have us be for others. Like Father, like sons.

And so today, your Saviour has come, once again, to do what He always does - to mercy you, to forgive you, to give you His Spirit and life as He gives you His own Body and Blood. The word He spoke from the cross - "*It is finished*" - that it be finished in you. That you be perfect. For those two words are, in fact, *the same word*. What Jesus completed on the cross, is your perfection. What you need. And he gives to you here. For God doesn't just demand these things, He gives them: mercy, forgiveness, life, salvation. *It is finished*, that you may give them to others.

For, as St. Paul wrote, ***you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.***

And so in Christ, He is your Father, and you are His sons.

Do not be afraid to be who you are.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.