
Scandal of Mercy

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Lent 4 – Year C

This Gospel has “scandal” written all over it. It all starts with this younger son scandalizing his family and community by asking his father for his inheritance—while the father’s still alive, which is like telling him he may as well be dead. It’s a harsh rejection of the father, the family, and all propriety.

Then, to add insult to injury, he runs off to a distant country—as far away as he can get—and squanders everything in dissolute living. Who knows? Maybe he got caught up in drugs. Maybe he fell in with a bad crowd, or had a run-in with the law. Maybe he did some time, and is now marked as a sinner, forever.

He’s the black sheep that no one talks about at family reunions, at least not out loud. They whisper, of course, and shake their heads, and sneak pitying glances at his father. “Poor man—insulted and disgraced—and still so foolishly hopeful for that son of his.”

Now the *other* son: he’s always been a good kid. He’s had to pick up all the pieces, you know, though he’s been insulted and humiliated too. Unlike his brother, he’s done all the right things: worked hard, never got into trouble, went into the family business, married a nice girl from a nice family.

Meanwhile, still far from home, his brother hits rock bottom. After he’s spent everything, a famine strikes, and he’s desperate—so desperate that he hires himself out for the worst of the worst jobs: feeding pigs in the field. He’s so hungry that he gladly would’ve eaten the pigs’ food—which is about as low as a Jewish man could go.

No one has compassion on him. No one helps him. “He brought this on himself,” they say. “He made his bed. Now let him lie in it!” And he does.

But then he comes to himself. Then he remembers where he comes from, and who he comes from, and who he *really* is. He remembers the abundance of his father’s house and his father’s love. He confesses, to himself at least, that he’s sinned, and been a wretched son. He knows he can’t undo what he’s done. Because of all the pain he’s caused, his relationship to his father will never be the same. The most he can ask for is to be treated like a hired hand.

So he sets off toward home. While he’s still a ways off, his father sees him and runs out to meet him, in a most undignified way. Shouldn’t he make the boy pay for all he’s done first, and prove he’s really changed—and even grovel a bit? But no, the father drops his indignation and his dignity and runs out, his arms wide open for embrace. I’m sure there will be some hard conversations to follow. For now, the most important thing is to welcome his son home. Grace first. Mercy first. Love first.

It’s only after the father has shown him mercy—it’s only after the father has welcomed him home, and given him a big-old bear hug, and kissed him—that the son’s able to get his confession out. But the father’s so happy that he hardly hears it. He doesn’t ask the son if he really means it, what he’s going to do differently now, or how he’s going to fix all that he’s broken. Rather, he calls for a celebration.

This is a scandal too, and the elder son knows it. When he comes back from working in the field (like his brother) and finds out what’s going on, he’s outraged, and refuses to go in. How could his father welcome this reprobate, this offender,

this loser, after all he's done? How can he trust him—and love him? He should be punishing him, not throwing a party for him!

The father comes out to meet him, too, as he met his brother. The father drops his dignity for him, too, and pleads with him to come in, which hardly befits a man of his standing. But this son rejects his plea, and him—and accuses him of not being fair—of not appreciating and rewarding all his faithfulness and hard work. This son seems to think that love is transactional and based on moral performance.

The father replies, “Son, you’re always with me, and all I have is yours.” The father has always loved him, and his love for one son is not diminished by his love for the other. His justice is not diminished by his mercy.

We don’t know if the elder son decides to trust him and come in. We’re left with him hanging outside, with a decision to make.

Remember why Jesus starts telling this parable to begin with? Because the Pharisees and scribes are scandalized by *Jesus’* mercy—because they’re grumbling about him welcoming sinners and tax collectors and eating with them. As if *those* people, whose sins have been exposed and convicted, were the only sinners around. As if their sinfulness meant they should be segregated from the self-proclaimed good and righteous. As if their failures, and weaknesses, meant that they no longer deserved to be loved.

Jesus’ mercy scandalizes them, just as the father’s mercy for one son scandalizes the other—and us, too, perhaps. Mercy sounds good, doesn’t it, when we identify with the younger son? But we may not like it so much when we’re in the elder’s shoes. It doesn’t fit with our sense of tit-for-tat justice, or our illusions of self-righteousness. It disrupts our convenient black-and-white thinking, and our penchant for depositing people once-and-for-all into categories of guilty or innocent, right or wrong, winner or loser, friend or enemy. To our lock-’em-up-and-throw-away-the-key society, it insists that nothing—no sin, no offense, no weakness or failure—can separate us ultimately from the love of God. Nothing utterly removes someone from God’s sphere of compassion, nor, with God’s help, from ours.

Yes, ours, too: because we’ve been shown mercy, too, every one of us, whether we know it (like the younger son) or don’t (like the elder). So we’re called to show mercy, too--to stand ready to embrace those who have gone astray. *Ready* to embrace—because reconciliation takes two. There can be no reconciliation in the midst of wrongdoing or evil; there can be no real reconciliation until the truth is out: until the younger son confesses and repents; or until he elder recognizes his own sinfulness and need for grace.

The embrace is a vulnerable gesture, of course. It lets another dangerously close to your heart. It opens you up to rejection, maybe even hurt. The arms spread wide for embrace don’t look all that different from Christ’s arms spread wide on the cross—the ultimate rejected embrace. All too often, like the elder son, we do choose to reject God’s embrace, or the embrace of the other—out of pride, or resentment, or fear, or simply the depth of our hurt.

Even in this broken world, we’re called to be ministers of reconciliation, evangelists of God’s mercy and justice, imitators of the Father’s embrace. And especially as the church, the Body of Christ in this world, we are called to welcome sinners home, as we ourselves have been welcomed.