**Crossings Text Study Group – All Are Welcome!**

**Wednesday Mornings at 9:30 A.M.**

**Martin Luther Lutheran Church, Milwaukee**

The Gospel reading for Epiphany 7 (Luke 6:27-38) continues Jesus’ sermon on the plain. Indeed, it is an expansion of the “blessing” and “woe” pronouncements (last week’s text) with which Jesus began his sermon. The sermon is especially fitting as we close out the Epiphany season, for it is Jesus’ early attempt through teaching to “make manifest” the “ethos” of the kingdom of God that he will put into action in his passion.

I use the word “ethos,” as opposed to “ethics,” quite intentionally. Ethos, unlike “ethics,” does not refer to a set of rules or demands that are to be followed regardless of circumstances, but the inner “character” or spirit or motivational core out of which a person or social system acts. For example, the ethos or character or spirit of capitalism is the “profit motive,” getting credit where credit is due (cf. Lk 6:32, 34, etc.). Accordingly, capitalistic ethics or behaviors arise out of the spirit or character of capitalism. In the case of Jesus, the ethos or spirit or character of the kingdom of God is “mercy.” Kingdom “ethics” arise out of the spirit of mercy, “just as [our] Father [in heaven] is merciful (cf. v. 36).

To say it differently, ethos has to do with “being,” that is, who you are at your core. The assumption is that we will act in a way that is consistent with our “being.” To realize this helps us to understand the imperative Jesus gives to his disciples in v. 36: “Be merciful, just as your father in heaven is merciful.” Jesus is encouraging his disciples to “be” what he has made them to “be.” He made them disciples by bestowing upon them his “blessings,” the mercy of the Father. And the distinguishing feature of their “new being in Christ” (to use Tillich’s terminology) is their faith in Christ c.f. 7:50, etc.). Luther put it this way, “as you believe/trust so you have/are.” To believe in Christ is to become a “little Christ.”

As vs. 27 indicates, not everyone can “hear” or “listen to” (as the NRSV translates it) what Jesus is saying. Those who are “of this world” cannot, but those who are “of the kingdom” can. Moreover, it is important to note that the term “hearing” here is a metaphor for “faith.” Therefore, it is important to note that Jesus is speaking here to disciples, “you-all that hear.” And his assumption is that “you” will “get it,” if not sooner, then later, and not by your own reason or strength, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. (See Lk 10:21-24.)

The bulk of the sermon consists of Jesus giving concrete illustrations of what the character, spirit or ethos of the kingdom is all about. In a word, it’s about “being merciful, just as your father in heaven is merciful” (v. 36), but the illustrations help to amplify what “mercy” looks like. It is radical and its radicality is seen best when placed next to conventional ethos.

The first set of illustrations are both general in nature and directed to the community of disciples (v. 27). They are directed to “you-all” or “you” plural. The ethos of the community of Jesus’ disciples is seen in “loving your (plural) enemies,” “doing good towards those who hate you (plural),” and “blessing those who curse you (plural).” In other words, the character of Christian community will be that of Christ himself. On the surface it may simply look like a posture of non-retaliation, but it is more than that: it is about being willing to suffer loss for the sake of establishing reconciliation with others – the enemy, the hater, the curser. “You-all (plural) who hear what Jesus is saying will understand that this is not about being a wet noodle or indifferent to wrongdoing. On the contrary, it’s about being engaged in Jesus’ mercy ministry: “be[ing] merciful as your Father in heaven is merciful.

Jesus next gives more “individualistic” illustrations (v. 28-35a), where the “you” is singular (vv. 28-29). As individual disciples, engaged in the realities of this world, our actions are motivated not by “what’s in it for us,” but with regard to the situation of the other. For example to suffer violence will not cause us to become violent (v. 29), to suffer lose of property will not cause us to be possessive (v. 30), and to give or lend to those who ask, but who do not return it, will not cause us to be demanding (v. 30).

In essence, Jesus is saying that we, even as disciples of Christ, will often be on the “losing end” of worldly realities. But even more, he is saying this: Don’t let such losing deter you from “being” the kind of mercy-trusting people Christ has made you to be. Don’t let the kind of losing Jesus describes here cause you to fall back into being the worldly kind of people you once were who love only those who love you in return or who lend only to those who are likely to repay. That is the way “sinners” live. They live expecting “to get credit” for what they do from the ones for whom they do it. And though they may at times get credit from them where credit is due, it merits no credit from Jesus’ Father in heaven. For that is not how he operates. “He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked” (v. 35). He is the God of mercy.

Of course, for Jesus’ disciples being losers in the world, does not mean being losers with their heavenly Father. On the contrary, with him they can’t lose! For not only is their reward great, but they already have it in hand. They are already, through Jesus the Son, “children of the Most High” (35). You can’t do any better -- any greater -- than that! But, of course, Jesus’ disciples have not only Jesus’ word on this. They also have his death and resurrection as confirmation. For in suffering the cross Jesus loved his enemies, did good to those who hated him, and lent/spent his life as a ransom for theirs. He literally became the embodiment of the Father’s mercy to sinners. And in return, in reward, the Father raised him up so that “be[ing] merciful, just as you Father in heaven is merciful (v. 38) might now become our ethos, our way of life, a way of life that has no end.

**Martin Luther Lutheran Church --**  9235 W. Bluemound Rd, Milwaukee, WI 53226

**Wednesdays -- 9:30-11 a.m.**

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I look forward to exploring the Scriptures with you together,

Peace,

Steve Kuhl

The Crossings Community, Inc.