

Faith You Can Fit in Your Pocket  
Matthew 5:7 - Blessed are the Merciful, for You Will Receive Mercy  
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Todd Smith Lippert

If you read the Star Tribune advice columns, and I'm not saying I do or do not, on Monday you would have read the following entry:

Dear Carolyn: my girlfriend, "Cleo," is allergic to seafood. She does not carry an EpiPen because "it's not that type of reaction," but she always asks lots of questions about ingredients and preparation. My mom finds the questions insulting and believed Cleo was making up the allergy.

Recently at my family barbecue, Cleo did her usual questioning before eating. Maybe 30 minutes later she started complaining that her face itched. She took Benadryl but she turned red, and her eyes began swelling. We had to go to the emergency room for a cortisone shot. As we're getting into the car, my mom confessed she fried the fish and chicken in the same oil and lied when Cleo asked. She admitted she planned to prove Cleo's allergy was fake.

My mom apologized and is paying the emergency room bill. Even so, Cleo called my mom a monster and wants nothing to do with her. She also broke up with me, saying I shouldn't have to choose between her and Mom. She won't consider a compromise like eating before visits.

Is there any way to get past my anger at my mom and get Cleo back?

The advice columnist replies with: WOW. She then sufficiently picks apart the suggested compromise of eating before visits, and the mother's "jaw dropping smugness and hostility." She is in conversation with an internet response about whether this could be considered intentional poisoning. And then the advice columnist says, "Full disclosure on the poisoning story: I've seen a few like it recently. I suspect it's an offshoot of our foul cultural moment, where those different from us are openly (again) part of some contemptible Other who must be called out and shunned. Can't wait till it passes."

One definition of merciful I found was, Merciful: to be compassionate, to show kindly forbearance towards an offender or enemy.

Matthew 5:7 is from the Beatitudes, the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. These short statements of Jesus communicate the upside down reality of the Realm of God. Jesus affirms that God values the people the world doesn't seem to value: The poor in spirit, mourners, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for justice. God also values actions the world seems to give up on: peacemaking and showing mercy. The world Jesus is embodying and bringing into being through his ministry, stand on these sorts of actions. Peacemaking: letting go of violent actions, responses weapons and words. Mercy, having a posture of kindness and compassion towards those who frighten us, who are different than us, who we see as enemy.

I like Matthew 5:7 because it is simple, maybe even simplistic. It reminds me of the saying "speak kind words, hear kind echoes." I also believe this verse is deeply challenging. It is healing balm for the deepest wounds we carry together as a people. There are obviously times when certain people are real threats to our safety, and we have to handle those threats appropriately. However, we are also increasingly afraid of one another, and/or When we feel threatened and afraid, we are increasingly unable to respond in appropriate ways, in ways that will help us stay in relationship and come together over time. Can we be increasingly compassionate and kind towards those who offend or threaten? Is that a gift we, the church, have to offer?

In Brene Brown's book, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*, she says a couple things that I think relate to our verse for today. She says, "People are hard to hate close up, move in." "It is not easy to hate people close up. And when we are in pain and fear, anger and hate are our go to emotions." She also says that building trust with one another is a vulnerable and courageous process. Part of what building trust involves is, "extending the most generous interpretation possible to the intentions, words, and actions of others." She is saying that to build trust you have to let go of suspicion. That requires vulnerability and courage.

If we think back to the story of the mom and the girlfriend, I wonder what it is the mom is afraid of. I have some guesses, since it is always difficult for parents to share someone they love so much with someone else, and to face the reality of a bond between parent and child changing.

Jesus is offering a course correction when we are gripped by our go to emotions that aren't helpful. The course correction is mercy, compassion, kindness. The course correction involves letting go of suspicion, having the courage to be vulnerable.

What would change in the seafood showdown story if the mom was able to extend the most generous interpretation possible to the annoying and offensive questions the girlfriend is asking about food preparation? Would there be more space for learning and understanding over time? What happens if the mom is trying to move in, get to know, understand? If the mom is offering mercy, has a posture of compassion, maybe the girlfriend will trust too. Maybe as trust is built, the questions the girlfriend asks will have less of an edge, maybe the questions won't come out as an accusation. Maybe the mercy will start flowing both ways.

This week I heard a beautiful story, told by Jerad Morey, Associate Minister at the Northfield United Methodist Church. The story can be found on the blog of the Minnesota Council of Churches where Jerad works part-time.

For the last few years, The Minnesota Council of Churches has printed yard signs that say, "Have a Blessed Ramadan" and they have invited church people to put the signs in their yards. This story comes from a clergy person who lives in the Twin Cities who had a "Have a Blessed Ramadan" sign in her yard during the summer of 2016. That summer Omar Mateen, who pledged allegiance to the Islamic state, shot and killed 49 people at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando. Here's the story:

*Today I wasn't home when our groceries were delivered. My husband was home.*

*When he answered the door, the delivery man asked, "Is that your sign?"*

*My husband said yes, although to be honest he most likely wouldn't put up a sign if I weren't here to ask him to because he likes his privacy and prefers not to draw attention.*

*My husband and the delivery man had a 20 minute discussion – with the delivery man first challenging the sign in light of what happened in Orlando over the weekend. My husband explained that our Muslim neighbors are as horrified as we all are by that act of hate and violence. He explained that his wife is a pastor and that in our family we focus on loving people, honoring that people believe different things, and being good neighbors. And none of our neighbors think it's okay to kill 50 people.*

*By the time the man left to deliver the rest of the groceries in his truck, he asked my husband if at our church this weekend we would be talking about how to love people even when you are kind of afraid or confused. My husband said, probably since in some way we talk about that most weeks. The man asked where our church is and said maybe he'll stop by. He said, "God bless you AND your neighbors," as he walked away.*

To me, that is a story where two people were close up, they had a conversation, and it was hard to hate in that conversation. The Christian offered a course correction to go to emotions that come from pain and fear. The hate and anger became compassion. The suspicion became a generous posture towards the intentions of Muslim neighbors. This is a merciful posture, one that will lead to the building of trust over time.

We need these sorts of conversations all over the place.

The church, what we do here each week, "talking about how to love people even when we are afraid or confused," can be part of the solution. We offer this solution because we have this tradition that reminds us the world often gives up on things we really need, like peacemaking, like mercy.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

