



Reflection from Joan DeMerchant

God regards offenders a lot more favorably than we do.

Today's reading from the Book of Wisdom is pretty startling. God has mercy on all, overlooks sins, loves and spares all things, loathes nothing, gives people a chance to abandon their ways.

That seems like a lot of people, presumably including those who have irritated/harassed us, lied to us, cheated us, accused us unjustly, hurt us in any way. And what about grifters, outrageous politicians, abusers, religious manipulators, untrustworthy influencers...even military invaders and murderers? I don't see any exceptions to God's love and mercy in this reading.

Then Paul reminds us that Jesus came to save what was lost, which is a pretty broad, generic statement. And today's gospel dramatically illustrates this in Jesus' loving gaze up into that sycamore tree to recognize the cheating little tax collector, Zacchaeus—even going home with him. He recognizes that Zacchaeus is more than his shady reputation.

This message of mercy is great news for all of us who have been offenders in multiple ways. But--there's usually a challenging question in the Good News and it's often: What does this require of us...of me? In this case, what's required of us regarding anyone considered offensive—or worse? Our legal system is clearly retributive, not restorative, designed to deliver what the perpetrator “deserves”—not what's needed to restore his/her humanity. Our national psyche is far more attuned to punishment/vengeance than mercy. It would seem that there are unforgiveable people, unforgiveable actions, unforgiveable evil—AKA: not eligible for mercy.

The questions are hard to digest and harder to answer. So that leaves this for you and me: Who irritates, infuriates or has hurt us so much that we would never forgive them? Never even trust them if they asked for forgiveness, appeared to have changed or wanted to change? What criteria would push us from being totally judgmental into the human respect or mercy column?

Wisdom of a secular nature tells us that the first step is awareness—the ability to push through our pride and stubborn self-defenses to admit our biases. This is distasteful, especially when we're committed to standing up for what is true and good. In addition, all the loud voices we hear, in the media and in our heads, keep pointing out the negative in these others. It takes serious soul-searching to silence those voices. It takes dogged, painful openness to allow new insights to emerge. Who wants to do that?

Fortunately, mercifully, God's mercy toward us makes it possible for us to consider showing mercy to “undeserving” others. In fact, God's mercy calls us to exactly that.

Regarding the thorny question of whether there is such a thing as unforgiveable evil/people: Let's just start with where we are. That's challenging enough.

*Blessings,
Joan*