

August 1, 2021

“Blessed are the Merciful”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Matthew 5:1-7

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“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” Take a moment and just reflect on those words. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

This fifth beatitude of Jesus Christ we’re looking at today is so beautiful and gracious in its meaning, isn’t it? Why? Well first, because that word mercy strikes a chord with us. You see, all of us know deep in our hearts and minds that we have been in need of mercy many times in our lives, haven’t we? We all have a past. We’ve all made mistakes, we’ve all messed up in one way or another. Yes, we all are in need of mercy – forgiveness, compassion, understanding. So that thought of mercy resonates within us. But there’s a second wonderful thing about mercy that makes it even more special. And that is when we reach out and extend mercy to others. It makes us feel good. In fact it makes us feel worthy and noble. It’s as if we are an extension of God’s loving grace offered to someone. And that’s a wonderful, a blessed feeling isn’t it? Probably the most famous writer the world has ever known, Shakespeare, felt mercy was of such worth, he wrote this line: *“The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.”* *It blesses him that gives and him that takes.*

So if this mercy thing is so blessed, why does it appear the world is so lacking in this virtue? And why is it that, so often, we too are not prepared to go there, to offer mercy? Well, I think there are a number of reasons. Perhaps it’s because we’ve become hardened to a degree by the world. We look at some of the people and situations around us and say, “They’ve made their own bed, let them lie in it.” Or sometimes we don’t think a person deserves our mercy. They have hurt us in some way, or done something that upset us, and in our self-pride, we just don’t want to forgive them. And, finally, there are many situations that we come upon "by chance", and remember that term, "by chance", where we just don't want to extend ourselves. It involves too much time and effort, it takes away from our own lives and priorities.

But here is Jesus telling us we need to have an attitude of mercy. And it’s not just in his Sermon on the Mount that he talks about it, but many other times as well. So today, I want to focus on two of his most famous parables about mercy. The first is called the Unworthy Servant. It’s about a great king who was settling accounts with some of his servants, people he had trusted with significant responsibilities. One of them had done a very poor job, and now he owed the king tens of thousands of dollars. A debt that

man could not even remotely begin to pay. So the king decided to foreclose on the debt by throwing the servant into jail. But the man begged and appealed, and the king showed him mercy by canceling the debt, and letting him go. Now you might expect this man would go out and extend that same compassion and mercy on other people. But no – he does just the opposite. He comes upon a fellow servant who owed him a relatively insignificant sum, something around \$10. And he seizes the man by the throat and demands payment from him. The man begs and appeals for mercy and more time, but his appeal is refused. When news of this shameful incident reached the king, he called the first servant to him and said, “You wicked servant. I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you have not have shown the same mercy on your fellow servant.” And the king throws him in jail.

Now this is one of those stories we might initially scoff at – the details of the story are so widely exaggerated, comparing a debt of ten dollars to one of tens of thousands of dollars. But that's what the story is trying to get across. That all of us have been forgiven so extensively by God for our sins and misdeeds, that any debt owed to us by another human being is inconsequential, and by comparison, meaningless. We have received mercy from God in abundance! Shouldn't we, therefore, gladly and willingly, extend forgiveness, compassion, understanding, to others? The answer, of course, is yes. Because Jesus concludes his story with a stern warning. He says, if we do not show mercy, we can be sure that a day of reckoning will come for us, when God will consider just how merciful we have been.”¹ As St. Paul reminds us, “Each one of us will give an account of himself to God.” Have we been merciful to others?

The second story about mercy is one of Jesus’ greatest teachings of all times – the parable of the Good Samaritan. “A certain man was going down the road and fell into the hands of some evil men. Well, these men stripped the man, and beat him, wounding him so badly that they left him for dead. Now, "by chance", some others were coming down the road and saw the beaten man but passed him by on the other side of the road. They obviously didn’t want to get involved and take the time and effort to help. But then a Samaritan, a stranger, a foreigner, came by and was moved with such pity and such compassion, that he tended to the man, and saved the man’s life. When Jesus finished this teaching, he asked the person he was speaking with, “Who was a neighbor to this man?” Who was this man’s brother or sister? And the person answered, “The one who showed him mercy.” Then Jesus commanded, “Go and do the same.” Go, and be merciful.

¹ Beatitudes from the Backside, J. Ellsworth Kalas

You know, in this parable from St. Luke's gospel that takes some eight verses, only one sentence is given to talk about the bad guys. Now keep in mind that Jesus did not live in a bubble. Just like today, he lived in a time when there was violence and hatred and indifference in the world. But Jesus doesn't dwell on that. Instead he spends the rest of the story talking about people like you and me. 'By chance,' some people passed by the dying man, but only one person stopped to help him. The late children's entertainer, Fred Rogers, or "Mr. Rogers" as most of us know him by, always said that the most important thing to look for in bad situations to give us hope, was "the helpers". And that really is the great hope for this world, isn't it? You and me being the helpers, showing love and compassion and forgiveness and mercy to all.

Because that's the bottom line of all Jesus' stories, as well as today's beatitude. Our attitude shouldn't be, "Will I give mercy?" but rather, "Who needs my mercy – my forgiveness, my compassion, my understanding?" "And how much can I give?" To the person who has hurt you. To the person who has made his own bed. And, of course, to the persons you come upon 'by chance.' You see, as we take our journey down the road of life, we, too, 'by chance,' come upon people every day who need mercy. People, who often, through no fault of their own – be it the environment in which they were brought up, their physical or mental limitations, or just hard times, are in need of our mercy. They may just need a kind word, a sign of encouragement, a pat on the back. They may need money – an amount that for you is insignificant, but to them, may be a saving grace. They may need acceptance – knowing they are "different" in the world's eyes, but wanting to be loved in God's eyes, and in your eyes. Yes, every day we come upon these 'chance encounters' with those who are struggling, who desperately long for mercy.

And when we stop to think about it, is showing mercy really all that hard? Especially when we consider that we have received mercy upon mercy from God? For all our mistakes, all our misdeeds, all those times we mess up, don't get it right. And there is our merciful God – forgiving, patient, compassionate, understanding. Giving us another chance again and again and again. And who knows – if a little more mercy was shown in the world, might there be less anger, less violence, less indifference? Yes, "blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."