

Matthew 18:21-35; Matthew 5:7  
Mercy Me - Justice Thee?  
Grace United Methodist Church  
August 23, 2009

I wonder how many of you remember this quote from William Shakespeare: “The quality of mercy is not strain’d . . .”? This line comes from his play, *The Merchant of Venice*. It is part of Portia’s appeal to Shylock who wants to take his pound of flesh from Antonio because Antonio was unable to pay his debt.

Portia argues for mercy saying:

“The quality of mercy is not strain’d,  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:  
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes  
The throned monarch better than his crown;  
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,  
The attribute to awe and majesty,  
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;  
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;  
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,  
It is an attribute to God himself;”

Mercy is an attribute of God. Over and over the scriptures tell of God’s mercy. The Psalmist says: “Thy mercy is great unto the heavens . . . “ **Jesus says that mercy should also be an attribute of his disciples. In the fifth Beatitude Jesus says: “Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.”**

Several years ago we witnessed an amazing demonstration of the mercy Jesus blesses. On the morning of October 2, 3006, a troubled milkman named Charles Carl Roberts barricaded himself inside the West Nickel Mine Amish School, ultimately murdering five young girls and wounding six others and then committing suicide. It was a dark day for the Amish community of West Nickel Mines, but it was also a dark day for Marie Roberts - the wife of the gunman - and her two young children.

The following Saturday at her husband's funeral, Marie experienced a deep mercy as Amish families, about half of the 75 mourners present, came and stood alongside them in the midst of their own blinding grief. Despite the crime the man had perpetrated, the Amish came to mourn Charles Carl Roberts and to comfort his family.

Bruce Porter, a fire department chaplain who attended the service, described what moved him most about their gesture: "It's the love, the forgiveness, the heartfelt forgiveness they have toward the family. I broke down and cried seeing it displayed."

I don't know about you but I find the demonstration of the Amish amazing! I don't have a problem with mercy if I am on the receiving end. It's when I am the one required to **show** mercy that I struggle - because the only kind of person to whom I can show mercy is one who doesn't deserve it.

In 1848 Prince Felix of Schwarzenberg was appointed foreign minister of Austria. After the Hungarian revolt was suppressed in 1849, someone suggested to the prince that it would be wise to show mercy towards the captured rebels. The prince replied, "Yes, indeed, a good idea, but first we will have a little hanging."

A little hanging, a pound of flesh; the prince's comment deftly describes our human problem with Jesus' words. As a purely theoretical concept, mercy sounds great. The problem comes when we find ourselves in situations where we are actually challenged to implement them. Perhaps the greatest reason we struggle with showing mercy is because needing to show mercy presupposes that a real debt is owed.

There is a story told about a mother who came to Napoleon on behalf of her son who was about to be executed. The mother asked the ruler to issue a pardon on

behalf of her son, but Napoleon pointed out that it was the man's second offense, and justice demanded death. "I don't ask for justice," the woman replied. "I plead for mercy." The emperor objected, "But your son doesn't deserve mercy." "Sir," the mother replied, "it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask." Her son was granted the pardon.

Because mercy can only be granted to those who don't deserve it, it is much easier to accept than it is to give. When I experience mercy, I know that I have nothing to lose and everything to gain. We accept God's grace because we know we are sinners and it is our only hope. But what happens when someone sins against us? How do we respond when someone says something behind our back or when someone takes advantage of us? How do we feel when we do something for someone and they forget to thank us? What if that person treats us cruelly?

Mercy is not something that comes naturally to us, even after we have experienced God's grace and put our faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord. Real debt is extremely hard to forgive.

Jesus' call to be merciful really brings us up short because we realize that if we respond in the way Jesus describes, we must cancel the debt. If we behave as Jesus teaches, we will suffer loss - our debtor will get away without having to pay for what he or she has done. There is something deep within us that recoils at this thought.

So Peter comes to Jesus and asks, "Lord how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answers, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" or as some translate Jesus words, "seventy times seven." Then Jesus goes on to illustrate his words to Peter by telling a parable.

The parable tells the story of a king whose servant owed him an impossibly large sum. When the king called in the debt, the servant begged for patience and

asked the king to give him time to repay the full amount. This desperate request was as impossible as the debt itself, because it would have taken several lifetimes to acquire the amount that was owed—about 165,000 years! The king, of course, knew the hopelessness of the servant's situation. Instead of giving him more time to repay or making the servant pay for the debt with his life, the king canceled the debt altogether.

It would be nice if that were the end of the story. But Jesus goes on to say that no sooner had the servant gone out of the king's presence when he found a fellow servant who owed him a debt. The forgiven servant grabbed his fellow servant and began to choke him. "Pay back what you owe me!" he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, "Be patient with me, and I will pay you back." These were the very words the forgiven servant had used with the king when he pleaded for more time to pay back his impossibly large debt—but the irony is lost on him. The forgiven servant had his colleague thrown in prison. Jesus says, "When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'"

This is exactly the point we need to understand. This is the point at which mercy can begin to flow from us to others. When we understand and fully comprehend the debt we owe to God because of our sin, then the debt of others will seem minimal by comparison. It's only as we recognize our own poverty of spirit, mourn our own sin, humble ourselves before God and hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God that we are able to show mercy to others. Mercy comes from a heart that recognizes its own spiritual bankruptcy.

An **empty** heart, a heart that is poor in spirit; a **broken** heart, a heart that mourns; and a **humble** heart, a heart of meekness lead us to hunger and thirst

for righteousness. This righteousness is not only a right relationship with God it is a right relationship with each other.

If we don't take the first four steps down the path of blessing that Jesus lays before us, if we don't recognize our poverty of spirit or mourn our sin, or humble ourselves before God, then we won't be merciful and Jesus says we won't be shown mercy.

In the first four beatitudes the condition Jesus describes is the antithesis of the blessing: the poor in spirit are given the kingdom; those who mourn are comforted; the meek inherit the earth; those who hunger are filled. In other words, the blessing answers our need. But in the fifth beatitude, mercy stands as both the blessing and the need.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." Some people have interpreted Jesus' words as a warning that unless we show mercy we won't be shown mercy. I don't believe that's Jesus point. He's simply reminding us that we need mercy, too. We've all sinned and fallen short of God's glory. But Jesus looked beyond our faults and saw our need. He removed the mud and washed us clean. He healed our brokenness so that we could begin to see the masterpiece of who we are, someone who is created in God's image, someone whom God created and called, "Good!" This precious mercy that we have received we need to share with others so that the flow of mercy expands unobstructed and reaches all those around us who also have a debt they cannot pay.

Jesus calls us to be merciful. Let me give you a definition of this mercy that we are called to share. **Mercy is simply love in action.** It's more than feeling pity for someone who is down and out. It's doing something to help alleviate their pain and suffering.

In the Broadway play, *My Fair Lady*, Eliza is courted by a man named Freddy. Freddy writes her love letters every day. Eliza's response to all of his love letters was to cry out in frustration, "Words! Words! I'm so sick of words! Don't talk of

stars burning above! If you're in love, show me! Don't talk of love lasting through time. Make no undying vow. If you love me, show me now!"

Mercy is more than kind words and deep feelings, mercy is love in action.

The Apostle Paul says: "God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

God saw you and me in our miserable, lost condition and took pity upon us. God knew that sin had rendered you spiritually dead and utterly hopeless. God knew that he was the only one that had the power to bring about a remedy. God's remedy was to participate in our sufferings by sending his Son, Jesus, into the world to pay the penalty of our sins by dying on the cross. Again the Apostle Paul says: "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ even when we were dead in transgression" (Ephesians 2:4)

Mercy is love in action! God acted and did for us what we could not do for ourselves.

The ability to be merciful comes from having received mercy. God is the source. Our mercy comes from God's mercy. God commands us to be merciful toward others because He has been merciful to us. When you think about the people who have hurt you, if you're struggling to let go of the pain that others have caused you, stop for a moment and consider all of flack you've given God. When you are fully in touch with God's mercy toward you, you will find God's mercy flowing through you to those who are as much in need of mercy as you are. God doesn't ask us to dismiss sin or excuse it. God asks us to be merciful – to choose to respond to the need, instead of the sin.

As we've been journeying along the path that the Beatitudes provide, the path that leads to a life full of God's blessing, we've seen that it's all about the condition of our hearts: poor hearts, broken hearts, humble hearts, and hungry hearts. In this fifth Beatitude Jesus calls for a **tender** heart, a heart that reflects

God's heart. Scripture speaks about the "tender mercy of our God." Christ-like people have tender hearts. May God give us tender hearts that look beyond people's faults and see their need! Amen.