

Merciful

Bryce L Miller
Menno Mennonite Church
February 20, 2022

Purpose: To explore the working of mercy in the way of the Kingdom.

Message: As the emulators of Christ, we are called time and again to the act of mercy as we incarnate God.

Scriptures: Genesis 45:3-11,15 (I will read); Luke 6:27-38 (secondary text)

Synopsis: Merciful is one of the central attributes ascribed to God as part of the fundamental character of divinity. Outside that context, we don't much hear of this as an element of personal or community life. Beyond the simple notion of "I know it when I see it" it often lives in the indefinable and difficult notions of God in the world.

Still, time and again we are invited to exactly this quality in emulating the way of God in our lives and our existence. Joseph finds mercy at the end of a long journey of betrayal and hurt. Jesus applies mercy from the very beginning and finds betrayal at the end, only to overturn even this in the act of mercy. We are invited to find mercy as the model of our lives for our living and our incarnation of the way of God with us.

Genesis 45:3-11; 15

³ Joseph said to his brothers,

“I am Joseph.
Is my father still alive?”

But his brothers could not answer him,
so dismayed were they at his presence.

⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers,
“Come closer to me.”

And they came closer.

He said,
“I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.
⁵ And now do not be distressed,
or angry with yourselves,
because you sold me here;
for God sent me before you to preserve life.

⁶ For the famine has been in the land these two years;
and there are five more years
in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest.

⁷ God sent me before you to preserve
for you a remnant on earth,
and to keep alive for you many survivors.

⁸ So it was not you who sent me here, but God;
he has made me a father to Pharaoh,
and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

⁹ Hurry and go up to my father and say to him,

‘Thus says your son Joseph,
YHWH has made me lord of all Egypt;
come down to me, do not delay.

¹⁰ You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me,
you and your children and your children’s children,
as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have.

¹¹ I will provide for you there—
since there are five more years of famine to come—
so that you and your household, and all that you have,
will not come to poverty.

’ ¹⁵ And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them;
and after that his brothers talked with him.

Mercy is hard. It is one of those things that is hard to pin down, harder still to define. Like the notion of crude art being something that “you know it when you see it” for lack of a precise definition, mercy is one of those characteristics that we only appreciate when it is displayed, and then it can come in a guise that is hard to pin down unless, perhaps at hindsight. Think about it: when was the last time you bore received mercy; or granted mercy? With its assumption of someone granting mercy assumes a bit of a power differential, we may not see ourselves often dispensing mercy, less often receiving it. Perhaps it was the time when you were tagged for speeding and received a warning when a ticket was indeed in order, or when in your youth when you knew that you were to be punished, and righteously so, only to have the strap pass you by. I have had the whole week to think about it and outside a handful of penny-ante incidents like this it is hard to come up with the quintessential moment of mercy. Mercy is essential, and but hard to see.

Making it harder still is the qualifications of mercy. By its nature, mercy can only be a gift. If there is work to be done, it is not mercy. If there is a transaction to be accomplished, there is not mercy. When someone throws themselves on the mercy of the court, the defendant accepts their guilt and the authority of the court to act upon that guilt. There is a recognition that justice requires some response for it be justice, but at the same time recognizes that justice can still exist when wrongs are confessed, contrition is realized, and mercy is granted. There must be something essentially supernatural—out of the normal order of the universe for mercy to be known and encountered. For all the essential nature of God, all the characteristics and notions we have of the divine character, mercy is one of the most central elements of the divine character, yet one of the ones that is least reflected in the human context (when was the last time you have heard someone described as being merciful, I wonder?).

Most of the time we hear the gospel this morning—Luke’s setting of the sermon on the Mount (only here it is a plain)—paired with a different piece of the Old Testament narrative. Coupling the 10 commandments with Jesus’ interpretation of and commentary on the Law of Moses seems to make sense. In many ways this is how we receive these words from Jesus—as new law and new rules that we must follow. But I like how these two readings speak to each other. The fact that I tied the Genesis passage to this sermon more closely is more to do with length and familiarity than it does with importance. But really they are tied in conversation with one another, though we don’t readily think about it in those terms. The bottom line is that they

are points of mercy. In Luke, Jesus provides the teaching and the imperative of love. In Genesis, we receive the conclusion of this chapters-long soap opera detailing Joseph and his journey from the position of victim to the dispenser of mercy. After decades of drama driven of jealousy, fear, deprivation and betrayal, the brother meet up again after Joseph ostensibly frames them as thieves to test them, only to have reconciliation, abundance, and mercy overcome separation deprivation and fear that was alive and well. Joseph's story embodies well the commands and teaching given by Jesus later on.

Even for we Anabaptists for whom these words and commands are among our most sacred, that doesn't mean that they are easy. We can not and should not pretend otherwise. They are simple words, and easy to understand even if they are extremely difficult to live out, sending us time and again to check and see if there was a footnote that we might have missed that would have cleanly defined how precisely all this was supposed to work in real life with real enemies. Even as we each have our own individual interpretations of how this works and why, we cannot escape a serious examination of ourselves of what is meant by these injunctions. We may well rationally accept the rejection of reciprocity, but that doesn't mean it sits well with us on a practical level. We are used to relationships that are more transaction than relationship. We respond in the way we have been treated, or to the tone of voice we thought we heard along the way. Our feelings and responses respond naturally to the attitudes and aggressions we meet in the day. Moving into this way of life requires a regular and deliberate recalibration of our thoughts, ways and means. This is perhaps the most demanding message Jesus brings us when he explains what real love looks like and what it means in the world. Perhaps picking up our own cross in following Jesus is less automatically about inviting and encountering suffering as much as it is about continuing to wrestle with the hard things that are necessary for the coming of the Kingdom.

As much as we can empathize and be encouraged by Joseph's journey and development to the place of being able to extend mercy, he is not, ultimately the model. Joseph's story begins with betrayal and ends with mercy. Jesus' story begins with mercy in the coming of God with us only to end in betrayal as the powers reject these very ideas and their viability. Only to circle back around again to mercy in the risen Christ. Joseph has to live a whole life to get around to where Jesus begins, much like we are constantly living our lives and being shaped by the Spirit to become more than what we are. It takes time, experience, patience, and yes practice to get to

the point where mercy is a part of lexicon, let alone part of our character. Mercy is essential to the character and nature of the living God, and God's dependable and abundant mercy is shown in Jesus from the very first. Following the way of Christ asks us time and again to manifest mercy as we manifest God with us. Perhaps the articulations of love for one's enemies is less about setting out an alternate set of laws we must follow as much as it is a guideline moving us time and again into the flow of God as we are instructed in the practicalities of the impractical, yet indispensable discipline of mercy. Perhaps we are given the challenge to love as we have been loved, as immense as that is, and the work of enemy love is one of the best exercises we have.

Several years ago, I had occasion to accompany an individual on an extraordinary journey. He had been an over the road truck driver. Driving one night through the dark of rural Saskatchewan, he suffered a lapse that left 3 high schoolers dead following a collision on the road. It was never fully established what precisely happened, or why, but he was held to account for the failure of that brief instant. He pled guilty to negligence. I traveled with him across provincial lines as he left his family behind to face the sentence and judgement of the court, with the real possibility of being remanded to custody right away without opportunity to say a full goodbye. We spent a full day in hearings listening to the pain of those who had lost so much and finding a way for him to take responsibility for what had happened. I lent my moral support as he heard time and again of that which could never be replaced, and as he tried through the limits of words to speak the inarticulable grief he too felt for that which had happened. He was sentenced to several years of prison time to start in a fortnight, and I was left to drive him away from the courthouse while the cameras rolled covering what had become a sensational trial. Down the road a while we stopped at the roadside markers where the accident had been where we knelt, and wept, and prayed: Christ have mercy. It left me wondering what mercy looks like here for the families. For this family man as well? For the impossible to make right, but can only be held to the grace and mercy of God?

I have no better answers today than I did then but to claim as an article of faith that there is mercy in God's love, wholeness in God's time, and healing in the fullness of both. For mercy is always rooted in love, and that is what God's story with God's people is about no matter what the time. It is love when God comes and encounters all those who have turned actively or not away from God's will in the ministry of Jesus Christ. It merciful love for the created one who

turn on creation which you have called good and run away from the creator who continues to re-create and reach out without abandoning us to our own fate. It is love shaped in the image of the divine that spurs YHWH to love the children who fail to faithfully affirm the humanity of one another. We might struggle with this notion, but in a sense we are enemies of God left to our own devices. We continue to defy, run from, and hurt that which was most deeply intended. That is what we mean by sin. We speak when we ought to be silent, offering insult rather than love. We are silent when we ought most to speak on that which God cares about most. We injure that which was meant to be good and holy and wholesome each and every day.

But God loves us—God’s enemies--not as some notional emotional affection that has no realistic consequence—but loves us with a force and a persistence that will not let us go, no matter what. It is mercy that we have received, and mercy we are invited in turn to share. Jesus is not inviting us into a task that we might fail, though we may. Jesus is inviting us into the reconciling work of God in the world who is merciful no matter what. Joseph was granted a glimpse into that mercy with the brothers who hurt him. Jesus exemplifies that pattern time and again, and invites us to but come and follow after him.

May we receive mercy, be amazed by mercy, and be so shaped by the merciful one that we can but only exude that mercy in return. This is our challenge and our salvation no matter what.