

“The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and
abounding in steadfast love.” AMEN!

Most everyone entered the church
through the narthex on Sunday.

Those who entered had polished shoes,
practiced smiles, and steady voices.

“Good morning” and “How are you?” Was often said.

But not much listening to what the answer was.

There was another entrance, a smaller door
that creaked just enough to
get someone’s attention.

That’s the door where James would enter.

And he always chose the seat closest to that door.

Close enough to leave quickly and
far enough to not be noticed.

James’ eyes stayed low and
his restless hands fidgeted as if he searched
for something solid to grip hold of
in a world that was never quite settled

for him.

Ushers knew him to be quiet and others
wondered if he was trouble.

No one meant any harm,
but no one knew quite what to
do about James, either.

Except for Miss Nancy.

She was older.

With silver hair pulled back neatly.

Miss Nancy had a way of seeing
people with clarity that felt
unsettling to some.

As if she could see clearly what most people ignored.

The first time Miss Nancy approached James he tensed.

“I’ve seen you sit here,” she said
softly and gently while lowering herself
onto the bench next to James.

“It’s a good place to sit. Close to the door.
I also like to be able to leave when I need to,”
she said.

James relaxed and was a bit surprised.

No one had ever said that out loud to him.

“I can’t always stay for the whole service,” he muttered.

To which Miss Nancy said,

“Sometimes staying five minutes takes
more courage than some spend in a lifetime.”

James made no reply, but his shoulders
relaxed even more.

Sunday after Sunday passed.

Miss Nancy never pressed James with questions
nor insist he join a group or volunteer somewhere.

She simply sat near him and sometimes
they spoke and sometimes they didn’t.

One morning, James arrived later than usual.

His breathing uneven and body extra-jittery.

“I almost didn’t come,” he whispered.

“It gets loud in my head.

Like everyone shouting at once telling me
I don’t belong here and that I’m ruining
church for everyone else.”

Miss Nancy nodded without alarm or shock.

“That sounds really heavy,” she said.

James continued saying he’s prayed and
asked God to fix him.

To make the voices stop, but they never do.

Miss Nancy was quiet for a moment then spoke carefully.

“Mercy isn’t always God removing the storm.

Sometimes mercy is God sitting with us during the storm,
and sending someone to remind us
that we’re not abandoned in it.”

James’ eyes filled with grief, “I feel unloved.”

Miss Nancy turned to look at the large
cross at front of the church.

“You feel overwhelmed, but that’s not
the same thing as being beyond love.”

Then the music began and James
didn’t head for the door.

He stayed.

Not because the noise in his head stopped.

He stayed because for once that wasn't
the only voice he heard speaking to him.

Over time, others began to notice him differently -
not as a problem to solve but as a
person to talk to and know.

Small actions like kind nods and greetings.

A seat set for him at coffee hour.

James still sat near the door,
not out of fear anymore, but as a quiet reminder
that mercy often waits in the breezeway or

on the margins near the exits
where people are unsure if they belong.

And sometimes, the most holy thing a person can do
is not fix another's suffering, but sit beside it
without turning away. (Pause)

This little story mind remind us of people
we've encountered in life.

The burden of mental illness is so hard to carry
for loved ones and for the person suffering.

I retell it to you adding my own

experiences of witnessing such mercy and despair.
(Pause)

In the gospel reading from Matthew
we detect a tone of frustration in Jesus' voice.

He must again correct misperceptions about
who he was and what he was accomplishing.

He's clearly irked by the fact that
people running the temple are failing
to see God at work in others.

The temple authorities were quick to criticize
what John the Baptist did and they're
quick to belittle what Jesus was doing.

Commentator Matt Skinner likens the authority's
inability to see God in the actions of
Jesus and John the Baptist

to children who refuse to go along
with the rules of the game.

When urged to act joyfully in what God was doing,
they won't dance.

When the situation called for mourning and grief,
they would not cry.

We don't know whether they were foolish,

immature, or haughty.

We simply know that they chose to be
hardheaded and hard hearted.

So Jesus speaks about judgment
in the verses not included in our bulletins,
but they're there in the Bible.

The judgment is to get the attention of the
people in power that do not see
God at work in others.

Jesus wasn't telling people to run away
from religion or run from devotion.

He was criticizing oppressive leadership and
denouncing the hypocrisy he saw in those who
had a lot of resources, and (frankly)
should know better.

They were putting way too much
burden upon the hurting, the impoverished,
and the displaced people being crushed
by imperial power. (Pause)

Then, in front of the crowd, Jesus launched into prayer.

In that prayer he identified himself quite clearly as
the Son of God and said that things about God
are hidden to some and revealed to others.

The infants get it, because they've not surrendered
to hardheadedness nor hard heartedness.

The call Jesus makes is for the weary and
those carrying heavy burdens.

Then Jesus offers them a yoke.

The yoke of obedience may strike us
as an unpleasant metaphor.

It tends to evoke negative associations in most people.

I hope none of us bristle with the call
to be obedient to Jesus, for he invites us
to "learn from him," and to wear his yoke.

The image evokes a sense of partnership as opposed
to following orders from a stern commanding officer.

Carrying this yoke of partnership with Christ,
is a way of imitating Jesus and putting him
over your shoulders.

He won't ask us to do anything he hasn't done already.

Yet, we must know that the mercy he promises,
the relief he gives is for the people burdened
by our conveniences.

AMEN!