

THE QUALITY OF MERCY

Luke 18: 9-14, 35-43

Let me begin with a story... Samir and Terry were both regulars in the same AA group in their community. An addiction to alcohol had caused a lot of devastation in both their lives. In Samir's case it had happened while he was getting home from work one evening. There were lots of cars on the highway. And while Samir was trying to keep a steady speed in the middle lane, a couple of cars were weaving in and out of lanes clearly racing each other. As they passed Samir's car one of them came so close that Samir swerved to avoid being struck. Unfortunately he lost control for a few seconds, just enough to hit another car next to him sending that car off the road and into a ditch. Samir immediately pulled over and got out to see what had happened. The car had rolled over.

Samir immediately called 911 and climbed down to where the car was to see if he could help. But what he saw totally horrified him! Inside was a woman and in the back seat an infant in a car seat. There was blood and nobody was moving. As first responders arrived and gently removed the bodies, they saw that both the woman and presumably her child, were dead. Samir could not believe what he witnessed. He fell to the ground. And even after he was questioned and fully declared innocent by police, all Samir could see in his mind was the face of the dead infant.

Samir was given time off for mental health leave... He went to see a therapist... But he also began to drink. At first it was just to help him forget and get some sleep. But soon, it was more than that. It became so bad it affected his work. His husband Jack began seriously to worry. If Samir didn't deal with the drinking he would not only lose his job, but other things as well. He was not present much of the time. He lost interest in things. He needed serious help beyond therapy alone. And so, Samir found his way to Alcoholics Anonymous.

Terry's story was a little different. While he, like Samir, had also been involved in a car crash that took the life of another person, Terry's history with alcohol had caused a lot of harm well before that fatal incident. Terry had grown up with an angry father, an alcoholic who also used violence to deal with his anger, especially when drunk. Terry had witnessed and experienced much, and even as he vowed never to be like his father, Terry fell into similar behaviour when he experienced stress in his life as an adult. Even after his wife left with their child and Terry was alone, he just increased his intake of alcohol. One night, coming home from a bar, Terry decided to drive where he should have taken a taxi. He didn't remember much but he woke up in hospital with multiple injuries.

If that wasn't bad enough, though, the police came in to question him. Evidently, Terry had crashed his car into another car driven by a young man who was killed. Terry was going to be

charged with 2nd degree murder. Terry pleaded guilty and spent some time in prison and later on probation he was mandated to get help with his addiction. Here's where he found himself alongside Samir in the same AA group.

OK, but when I heard this story, I was confronted by conflicting feelings within myself. I felt a real and very natural empathy for Samir. The poor man was caught in a bad situation at the wrong place at the wrong time, something that could happen to me on the road all too easily. Being a caring and sensitive man he was devastated by what had happened and he felt responsible for the death of two innocent lives. But was it his fault or the fault of the road racers who were and are a menace on our highways? Should Samir not find a way to forgive himself and accept forgiveness for being human and vulnerable to circumstances beyond his control? Empathy is the word I'd use for the feelings I'd have for Samir, and tragedy is what I would describe this situation to be, for the mother and child, and for Samir.

But what about Terry? Sure he grew up in a bad home and carried the trauma of abuse. But think about how he terrorized his wife and child, how he got into drinking and didn't take responsibility until it was too late, taking the life of another human being when he should have known better. I do not find it as immediate to feel empathy toward someone like Terry. Should he not have gotten help before he did such harm and was then mandated to do so?

And here, I want to make an important distinction between two kinds of love. There is empathy and there is mercy and the two are very different kinds of love. While I've been hearing a lot about empathy these days, especially as people like Elon Musk and Donald Trump see empathy as a weakness and a bad motive for making business decisions, mercy is something that would be further beyond the reach of those who are calling for a greater tough-on-crime agenda for governments.

And mercy is not about letting people off the hook... no. People's healing must include accountability and responsibility. But mercy is about forgiveness for those who are prepared to repent of the harm they have done even as they cannot undo the harm and the loss caused by the harm. So then, while many of us would hold up empathy as essential to a decent humanity, would we say the same for mercy? What quality of mercy is enough and what quality of mercy is maybe too much?

Let's dive into our scripture readings in search of revelatory wisdom.

As mentioned in the intro to our scripture readings, both accounts mention the word mercy. In fact, while the bible uses the word compassion, it doesn't use the word empathy. Rather the word used always is mercy. Does that matter? Consider our two accounts. Who are the two men who are shown divine mercy? The one man is blind, and in a world without social support, being disabled is a sentence of poverty. He is left to beg just to survive. But here's the thing.

Not only is this man's condition of blindness a reason to feel empathy for him, but in his world, people are blamed for their misfortune. What did this man or his family do so that such illness befell him? We may think this is awful of his world to blame this man for his condition, but is our world any different? People come here as refugees, people contract all kinds of illness, and all kinds of misfortune befall them. How often are people blamed for their situation? It's easier to blame because it requires less of us to care. By blaming the person for their lifestyle choices or fate or whatever, we somehow escape the burden of responsibility and care, letting ourselves off the hook.

And so, the bible and Jesus use the language of mercy. Mercy contradicts blame. Mercy goes further than empathy. Regardless of whether the man contributed to his sad condition or not, Jesus' response is one of mercy and care. God's heart is wide enough to embrace any person however great the blame. The man needs mercy, and the experience of mercy received deep in the heart empowers him to rise up past any shame or blame, to experience healing and empowerment to be and become.

OK, but what about the tax collector in the first account? In his case, the blame and shame are even more severe, and rightly so. A tax collector is not a good person. A tax collector is someone who takes advantage of people for a profit leaving them destitute. As a fellow Jew among Jews, a tax collector does the dirty work of Rome by collecting taxes from people and taking an extra cut on top for himself. He can take as much as he wants, and he has armed soldiers to deal with people who refuse to pay. And here, you have a tax collector who has come to the temple to pray seeking forgiveness. Do you feel sorry for him? What about all those people he has abused? Will he give them back their money and restore all those who have starved themselves to death or have had to go out on the streets beg? And yet, here he is himself begging for mercy. Whether he is sincere or not, should he receive mercy? If I were the person who had been starved or lost family and home to the actions of this man, would I be prepared to offer him mercy? Should God?

And yet, what happens in this parable? You have a Pharisee - a religious official, who is very meticulous in his religious devotion before God. But here's where the problem lies. The Pharisee is self-righteous. He believes he is better than the tax collector for obvious reasons, and he is, no argument there. The tax collector is a bad man whereas the Pharisee is a good man. And yet, what's the issue here? Mercy. The Pharisee lacks compassion and mercy. His first move is to condemn and feel superior. The tax collector has hit rock bottom, just like Terry. And what's the verdict? The tax collector receives mercy whereas the Pharisee feels no need for it nor has a heart for it. And so, he never experiences mercy either. All who exalt themselves in their self righteousness will be humbled before God, but all who humble themselves (because they know their need) will be exalted, justified, forgiven.

So what's the message here? Whether you are the blind man or the tax collector, Samir or Terry, or whether you are the Pharisee or anyone in between, you and I need mercy above all else. The quality of mercy that lives in us is directly connected to the quality of mercy we recognize we need. But isn't this unfair?! Why do I need mercy as much as people who have done seriously bad things? Why do I need mercy if I haven't done anything terribly wrong and I try my best? Why do I need mercy if I've tried to make things right for any mistakes I've made more serious or less serious? And why should I show mercy to one who has done the kind of harm that is life-altering and unchangeable?

A long time ago in Europe, there was a religious monastic named Martin Luther. Luther was a good man on the whole. He tried his best to be sincere and righteous before God. He prayed assiduously, performed all his religious duties, gave charitably and did works of mercy in his community. But deep down he felt inadequate and false. Why? Because he felt that he was a hypocrite. Just being better than bad people was easy. But what about all the mixed-up feelings within his heart? What about the daily irritations, resentments, petty frustrations and contempt for his fellow monks? What about his self-righteous judgementalism, envy, selfishness, self-preoccupation, self-pity, lack of consistent gratitude and graciousness?

Well, his superiors tried to encourage Luther. "It's ok, Martin, as long as you are doing your best, God is good with you. Don't stress over your bad days and bad moments. We all have them, even us good people. You're only human after all!" But Luther continued to be troubled. Is trying my best, as imperfect as it is, good enough to build my spiritual foundation of self-acceptance? No.

But it's at this point Luther was awakened to a deeper reading and discovery in the scriptures. We do not accept ourselves because we are simply doing our best. No! We accept ourselves because we are accepted and loved by God and by a Christ who has absorbed all sin, from the worst to the pettiest. That's what the cross is all about and that's what forgiveness is all about. Luther discovered that forgiveness is not something to be ashamed of needing. No. Forgiveness is liberation to be human, to be a sinner and to recognize that we are all in this together at some level. We all need mercy from the worst of us to the best. We all need mercy. And whenever we not only recognize our need but open our heart to receive mercy, our heart is changed so that mercy is the quality in our humanity we share with others.

Luther even came up with a paradoxical statement of faith to describe this reality. We are simultaneously sinners and righteous he declared. I, Harris, am a sinner, and whether I am better than some or worse than some, no matter the circumstances, justifications and rationalizations, and no matter if I try my best in every situation, I am a sinner. But, in and through God's mercy in Christ, I am also declared righteous, pure, holy, loved as infinitely precious and beautiful a creation of God. This is all grace. And living out of such grace and

gratitude I am free to be bold to know I am a sinner and bold in challenging myself to grow in mercy for others as much as for myself.

Whether it is Samir or Terry, whether it is a dictator or tyrant who needs to be brought to account for the many innocent murdered and killed, or whether it is me with my petty daily grievances, irritations, bad moods, impatience, quick-to-criticize and slow-to-praise-and-give-thanks moments... I and we are simultaneously sinners and righteous. The question is: do I believe this? Obviously whoever we are, the quality of mercy we live and breathe will depend on how much of a sinner we face that we are, but also how much we are justified and therefore righteous because Infinite Love has offered us the hand of mercy. The level of transformation we experience in our lives is linked to the depth of mercy we believe we need. And the quality of mercy we are prepared to show someone else is linked to the depth of mercy we experience.

What do you think? Amen.