

The Mercy We Give and the Mercy We Receive

Matthew 5:6; 9:35-6; Luke 15:17-24

Today's beatitude expresses one of the most beautiful things I can imagine about life: We live from mercy to mercy. Not from scarcity to scarcity but from abundance to abundance. God is not dispensing tiny drops of mercy as from a cosmic medicine dropper. It is like the rain that drenches us, like the sun that warms our faces.

Every day we are held in the mercy of God, everyday we can be mercy to others. "Blessed are the merciful", Jesus said, "for they shall obtain mercy." Today's sermon: "The Mercy We Give and the Mercy We Receive." Mercy is one of the names of God.

I don't think we need a dictionary to define mercy. We know it when we see it; we know it when it happens to us. Let us count the ways.

I

We see it in action in three places in Matthew's gospel. In Matthew 9:27 two blind men cry out to Jesus: "Have mercy on us, Son of David." And Jesus healed their eyes and gave them sight.

In Matthew 15:22 a Canaanite woman, an outsider who worshipped differently than the Jews and Jesus, came to Jesus and begged him to heal her daughter who was possessed by a demon. “Have mercy, O Lord!”, she cried. And Jesus healed her daughter and set her free.

In Matthew 18 Peter asked Jesus, “How often do I have to forgive someone who has done wrong? Seven times?” And Jesus said, “No, seventy-times-seven.” Then Jesus told a parable about a king who was going over his financial books to see what people owed him. A man was brought to him who owed him an astronomical amount, more than he could repay in two lifetimes. The man begged the king to have patience and give him time to repay the debt. Instead the king forgave him the entire debt. Mercy is like that. It overflows.

Mercy flowed from Jesus’ heart in story after story, mercy as healing, deliverance, forgiveness, liberation.

II

Through the centuries as the church has interpreted this beatitude, three meanings have risen to the top. One has been mercy as compassionate action. Like the action of the Samaritan in Jesus’ parable who at great personal risk and expense stopped on the road and saved the life of the Jewish man who had been robbed, beaten and left half-dead.

He bandaged the man's wounds, carried him to an inn and nursed him through the night. The next morning he left the inn-keeper his Mastercard number and said, "Charge me for all the man will need." Mercy is like that.

And how about the running mercy of the father of the prodigal son who when he spied him on the road coming back home sprinted to meet him, embraced him, and kissed and kissed him, who called for a homecoming feast for his son lost now found. Mercy as love, forgiveness and joy.

We live from mercy to mercy. Last week as we pondered "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and justice we talked about mercy in action. Jewish congregations have what they call *mitzvah* days. A *mitzvah* is an act of mercy and compassion. They assemble and go out to help people. We've had those kinds of days sponsored by our Missions Board.

When Jesus talked about God's mercy, he shocked people about its abundance, how it flowed to all people, not just to the Jews and the righteous. "God causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust, the righteous and the unrighteous", he said. "God is kind", he said, "to the selfish and ungrateful." Like we are someday.

We live, all of us, from mercy to mercy.

The second meaning often given to this beatitude is mercy as forgiveness. God's forgiveness of us, which make possible our forgiveness of others. Forgiving may be the hardest spiritual work we do. You wonder what Peter felt when Jesus told him that we should forgive not just seven times but seventy-times seven! Of course he didn't mean after 490 times you didn't need to anymore. I think part of the meaning is that we keep on trying to forgive until we finally do! C.S. Lewis wrote in his journal one day: "I finally forgave a person I thought I had forgiven 30 years ago."

As I've said before, sometimes I pray, "Lord, help me forgive", other times "Lord, help me *want* to forgive!", and sometimes, "Lord, help me *want to want* to forgive." If this were easy, why would Jesus put in the Lord's prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." The early church prayed it three times a day. We need it that often.

The gift of forgiveness sets free the person who has harmed us from guilt and remorse. And it frees us as well. Louis Smedes' book on forgiveness calls it "healing the wounds that bind us." It helps free us from the hurts of the past.

And when you cannot forgive, not now, know that God and Jesus have forgiven them. It's not all up to us. From the cross Jesus prayed, "Abba, forgive them for they know not what they do." We can do the same, pray God's forgiveness for them. Forgiveness is God's mercy to all.

IV

The third meaning of mercy is about hospitality, welcoming the outsider. We all feel like outsiders someday, there's an outsider in us all, somewhere. Will God welcome us? This mercy is about the life-giving hospitality of God and about our gospel of hospitality to others, especially to the outsider, those who live on the margins of life, the forgotten ones.

Jesus embodied this in his dinner fellowship with tax-collectors, prostitutes and sinners. He did not hold his nose. He brought to them the Divine Friendship. It was scandal because he did not make them first come down the aisle at invitation hymn to confess and repent. Grace came first. When the religious leaders complained Jesus said, "Those who are well need no physician." I bet you could have heard a pin drop.

Jesus told the story of the king who threw a banquet for all the big-wigs and VIPs in town. They all made excuses and turned down the invitation. The king then sent his servants to bring in any they could find. "I want my house filled!", he said. And it was filled with people, food and joy. Mercy is like that.

In the mercy that is hospitality we invite the shunned, the shamed, the over-looked, the outsiders, those who have been told they don't belong here.

Henri Nouwen describes hospitality as the creation of a safe space where a person feels free to come and be who they are without fear. Hospitality is not *Good Housekeeping* and *House Beautiful*. It is a home that welcomes people into such a safe and welcoming place. It is the hospitable heart, the hospitable church opening its arms to all.

We have a beautiful, newly refurbished sign out front. We've added a third plank. It says, "A Welcoming and Affirming Place." This is *the Church Beautiful*.

There was a story in *New York* magazine awhile back written in the 1980s by Gloria Gonzales who grew up in Spanish Harlem. There were hard days and good days, she wrote, and described one of the good days, a party thrown for a Marine come home. I'll let you hear her tell the story:

One long-awaited celebration was the night that Jose was due home after three years as a United States marine.

Every family had contributed a home-cooked dish and a dollar for the beer and soda. Neighbors began decorating the apartment with crepe paper and balloons the night before and someone was dispatched to the local funeral parlor to borrow folding chairs.

The day of the party relatives arrived from the Bronx and from as far away as San Juan. Papo, Jose's cousin, and I were posted on the stoop as lookouts.

A taxi arrived and deposited the passengers. Papo and I paid scant attention to the tall brunette in the off-the-shoulder blouse and billowing skirt.

It wasn't until she screamed our names and swept us off the ground in a crushing hug that we realized that the perfumed woman was Jose.

In a daze we lugged her suitcases up two flights, our eyes fixed on Jose's ankles, strapped into stiletto heels, as he took the stairs two at a time while urging us to hurry. With the music of Tito Puente in the background, Jose threw the door open and announced, "I am home." The needle was pulled on Tito Puente.

He said: "Me, Jose, the person has not changed. Only on the outside. You are my family and I love every one of you. If you want me to go I will go and not be angry. But if you find it in your hearts to love Josephina, I would love to stay.

No one spoke. Everyone stared....I stood in the open doorway, still holding the suitcase, not daring to enter.

After what seemed hours—but could only have been moments—his mother stumbled forward and said to her son, "Are you hungry?"

I was eleven. It was the best party I ever went to.

That's all God asks, apron in hand: "Are you hungry?" That's all mercy asks.

We live from mercy to mercy. I hope you have had those moments when mercy has flooded in, unexpected, overwhelming you. When it does it changes you. I hope you have received it into the deepest of places, from God, from others.

Chris Brown in his beautiful prayer last week prayed:

We do not attain anything by our holiness but by ten thousand surrenders to mercy. A lifetime of received forgiveness allows us to become mercy.

The ripples of mercy: we start them and they ripple out forever.

Shakespeare wrote:

The quality of mercy is not strained,
It droppeth like gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blessed;
it blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

(The Merchant of Venice IV,I,184)

The mercy of God is not strained, as through a stingy water dropper. It flows like the rivers, falls as the rain.

Thank you, God.