

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Second Sunday of Lent- March 4, 2007

Scripture lessons: Zechariah 7:8-10 & Matthew 5:1-2, 7

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

I think we all want mercy. Deep down, I think we all know we *need* mercy. I'm not sure, however, that in our culture there's much mercy to go around.

If we could count on mercy from each other, do you think we'd so often feel tempted to deny, rationalize, or minimize mistakes we've made or wrongs we've done? If we could count on mercy from each other, do you think we'd stress so much the things we think should be ours because of our rights? If we could count on mercy from each other, do you think we'd so often speak politically in voices that are so loudly self-assured and so sharply contemptuous of others? I don't think we would.

But in any case, as Christians, we can change all that. We can change it by taking more fully to heart Jesus' fifth beatitude- "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." God's kingdom has come near, Jesus says, and it's a kingdom full of mercy. The merciful know and rejoice in that fact. Deeply aware of their own need for mercy, they embrace God's gift of it. Grateful for God's mercy to them, they're full of mercy towards others.

It's not surprising that Jesus emphasizes mercy in his proclamation of God's kingdom come near. The New Testament word *elios* is the Greek translation of a Hebrew word used no less than 150 times in the Old Testament to describe God's disposition towards us. Today, the usual English translation of *elios* is "mercy" and rightly so, but the old King James rendering of it as "lovingkindness" is also helpful.

It helps us to see that at God's center, at the solid core, so to speak, of the almighty Maker of heaven and earth, is this supremely soft, warm, and tender reality known as mercy or lovingkindness. In one of the Old Testament's best known references to it, the book of Psalms on three separate occasions sings, "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (86:15, 103:8, and 145:8).

In its most basic sense, to be merciful means to give help to the wretched, relief to the miserable, or pardon to the guilty. It's passionate in its action, full of sympathy and compassion. Its essence is shown to us by Jesus, the essence both of God's mercy and the mercy to which God calls us.

In Jesus, God mercifully takes the initiative and *reaches out* to us in our brokenness. God doesn't wait around for us to pick up the pieces or to lift ourselves up by our own bootstraps. As theologian Donald McCullough says it, "Like the waiting father who ran to meet his prodigal son, God (speeds) down the corridors of eternity and hurdle(s) the barricades of our sin and misery to embrace us."

In taking on our life in Christ, God finds us even before we know we're lost. God comes and lifts us up even before we realize how far we've fallen. In mercy, God doesn't hold back, but reaches out.

In mercy, God identifies with us. God becomes one of us in Jesus, living our life, suffering our struggles and our pain. In the mercy of the Incarnation, God's compassion is complete. God refuses to keep any distance, but comes close to be with us. In holy mercy, God lives our life from the inside out.

From a distance, it's easy for us to make judgments about others that rationalize *keeping* our distance from them. If those homeless ones would only get off their duffs, they could find some work. If those migrants would only stay in Mexico, they wouldn't die in the desert. If those couples would only put their children first, they wouldn't get divorced. If those kids would only

buckle down to their schoolwork, they wouldn't get into trouble. From the proud heights of our safe distance, everyone else's situation looks cut and dried.

But in mercy, we climb down off our high horse. We risk coming close in order to see more clearly and understand more fully. Mercifully we stifle our own voices long enough to listen to others. Hearing more of their stories, reckoning with the depth of their difficulties, feeling the desperation in their cries, our icy and distant judgments start to melt. Our warm and compassionate mercies begin to flow.

It would be great if it was all that simple- but it's not. There's the vital matter of upholding responsibility. There's the crucial importance of making sure people are held to account. Does mercy simply forget about that? If in mercy we no longer seek justice, doesn't that mean we'll let evil run wild?

Back in 1999, Pope John Paul II visited my home area of St. Louis, Missouri. His visit coincided with the planned execution of Darrell Mease, a convicted killer who had gunned down three people. Governor Mel Carnahan was uneasy about carrying out a death sentence while the pope was visiting. He decided to delay the execution until after John Paul had left.

Carnahan was sitting in the front row the night John Paul celebrated Mass for a crowd of over 100,000 people. In his message for that service, the pope unequivocally called upon his listeners to be unconditionally pro-life. He said capital punishment, by taking away the opportunity for repentance was anti-life. Having delivered this message he walked over to Governor Carnahan, bent his head close, and made a personal appeal for mercy for Darrell Mease. He asked the Governor to commute Mease's sentence to one of life in prison.

The next morning, Mel Carnahan signed an executive order in keeping with John Paul's request. A massive storm of protest followed that laid a heavy political price on the governor. His struggle to honor the right relationship between justice and mercy cost him seriously.

But what is that right relationship? Christian philosopher Peter Kreeft offers this account of it in the context of the question of capital punishment. He writes, "The convicted murderer deserves to die. Any consideration of capital punishment that does not begin here, with justice and the objective moral law and (with) the rightness of punishment that fits the crime is . . . sentimentalism. Anyone who sees less than justice cannot see more. Justice is the precondition of mercy.

"But once justice is admitted, we are free to be merciful. Once we get beyond the silly (idea that) 'there's nothing to forgive', we can forgive."

In other words, once we embrace the justice of capital punishment, we can mercifully go beyond it to a better and truer alternative, i.e., punishment that keeps open the possibility of repentance and reconciliation, punishment that keeps open the possibility of genuine rehabilitation.

Mercy without justice is too flabby; it fails to hold people to account. Justice without mercy is too rigid; it never gives people another chance, and Lord knows all of us always are in need of another chance. In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia sees that it's God who brings justice and mercy together and who calls us to do the same:

"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 . . .
But mercy is above this scepter'd sway . . .
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice."

Mercy in fact achieves greater justice. Peter Kreeft continues, "(T)hough justice and mercy must be distinguished, there is a deep justice in transcending justice to mercy . . . Those who go beyond justice to mercy, get something beyond justice: (namely) mercy. And that is supremely just."

Kreeft highlights the illustration this gives of the principle of transcendence, which holds that we must go beyond a thing in order to perfect it. "The soul, not the body, perfects the body; God, not humanity, perfects humanity; mercy, not justice, perfects justice . . . We cannot fulfill the law of justice except by going beyond it to mercy, to forgiveness, to charity. Only love is 'the fulfillment of the law'. Only if we love our neighbor will we fulfill the demands of justice to (our) neighbor."

Those demands lead us to mercy. It is truly just to give mercy to others because God has given such great mercy to us. "Blessed are the merciful," Jesus says. They're blessed because just as God's mercy transforms their lives, their mercy can transform the lives of others with whom they share it.

To End All Wars is the story of just such a miracle. It's the autobiographical account of a man named Ernest Gordon, a British Army officer who was captured by the Japanese during World War II. They imprisoned him in a labor camp with thousands of others along the River Kwai in Burma.

Each day, Gordon was forced to join a work detail of prisoners in the low-lying swampland near the river. If any captive appeared to lag, a guard would decapitate or beat him to death. Many of the prisoners otherwise dropped dead from exhaustion, malnutrition, and disease. In the end, over 80,000 of them died.

For most of the war, this camp served as a laboratory for the survival of the fittest. The prevailing ethos among the prisoners was, "Every man for himself." Hatred towards their captors and the prospect of eventual revenge against them were their main motives for staying alive.

Like many others, however, Ernest Gordon could feel his life wasting away. Beriberi, worms, malaria, dysentery, typhoid, and diphtheria all combined to assault him. At one point, paralyzed and unable to eat, he asked to be laid in the Death House. That was the place, full of filth and flies, where the sick were sent to die by their fellow prisoners.

Something different, however, had also started to stir in the camp, something Gordon came to call "the miracle on the River Kwai". Amidst all the camp's hatred, brutality, and despair, some of its prisoners had started to act differently. There was one event in particular that brought this change to light and enabled it to shine more brightly.

One day a guard discovered that a shovel was missing. When no one confessed to the theft, he screamed, "All die! All die!" He raised his rifle to fire a shot at the first prisoner in line, when suddenly a single enlisted man stepped forward and said, "I did it."

Enraged, the guard smashed the butt of his rifle down onto the man's skull, killing him. That night, when the tools were inventoried again it was discovered a mistake had been made: there was no missing shovel.

One of the prisoners recalled Jesus' saying, "Greater love hath no man than this, than to lay down his life for his friends." This man's life mercifully laid down for his fellow prisoners made an enormous impact on many of them. Many started to look out for others instead of themselves.

Ernest Gordon saw and felt this change in a very direct and personal way. Two fellow Scotsmen, both Christians, started to come to the Death House every day to care for him. They dressed the ulcers on his legs and massaged his atrophied muscles. Gradually, with their help, he was able to put on weight and even regain partial use of his legs. Through their ministry to him, he was drawn into a community of Christians in the camp. Since he had studied some philosophy, he became by default an unofficial camp chaplain, even though he wasn't yet a Christian.

He became one, however, as that community became more and more deeply Christian. They called it their 'church without walls' and based it on a simple but profound faith in God's

merciful love. From that faith they resolved to act in merciful love and kindness towards all, even their enemies. Ernest Gordon's book describes a transformation of these men so complete that when liberation finally came, they treated their sadistic guards not with revenge but with continued mercy.

In commenting on this story, reviewer Philip Yancey says that the miracle on the River Kwai was nothing less than the creation of an alternative community, a tiny but mighty settlement of God's kingdom on earth planted amidst the toughest and wildest of weeds and in the unlikeliest of soils. In these extreme conditions, these men certainly did cling to a desperate hope that their lives wouldn't end in that jungle prison, but one day would resume back in Scotland or London or wherever else they called home. But even if it didn't, *even if it did not*, they were determined to keep on striving.

They'd keep on working in whatever days they had left to build an ever stronger community of Christian faith, hope, and love, one that would flow freely with tender and compassionate mercy towards all. The mercy of God, shared sacrificially by them on behalf of every other, even their enemies, would continue to transform the violent and sadistic world into which they'd been thrust into a place where the light of Jesus Christ would shine.

"Blessed are the merciful, indeed, for they will receive mercy." That was true for these men who lived the miracle on the River Kwai. It can be the same for us. Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff