

Mercy Me!
Matthew 5:1-12

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy Matthew 5:7

He's gone and made a shift. In the previous four beatitudes, Jesus sets out a condition and then a promise. Blessed are the poor in spirit, the condition; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, the promise. Blessed are those who mourn, they shall be comforted; condition and promise. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. The fifth beatitude is reflexive. The reward of mercy is mercy. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Was Jesus at a loss for words, running out of vocabulary; wasn't he quick enough on his feet to think of something different? Or is he revealing a deep secret? Is he perhaps telling us what intuitively we know – we get what we give. Give mercy, receive mercy.

Sadly mercy is in short supply in our culture's storehouse – the cacophony of greed, envy, strife; drown out the whispers of mercy. Many have become dry and bitter people. Our collective hearts seem to harden with each passing year. Maybe it's all of the stuff that comes at us in 24 hour news cycles – war, pestilence, terror, violence, murder, arson. Maybe it's the talking heads that bombard us with the latest and juiciest, feeding us with a steady diet of skepticism nurturing cynicism.

Ours is a permission giving culture – an anything goes world. What use to cause us to blush is now hardly noticed. The language of grace and eloquence once taught and treasured has been reduced to a courser, baser, even vulgar – watch Bill Maher; the words he uses in the public airwaves were at one time censored. They are base and vulgar. To raise objections is to be considered “not with it;” – prudish or Victorian. We give permission, but then when the mighty or the merely normal fall, we show no mercy, in fact we down right revel when the might fall. The first words from our lips – they got what they deserved. John Edwards, Tiger Woods – their star tarnished and frankly it causes no shortness of glee.

I believe that we need to be more merciful. Rising up from the gossip and glee to a higher level of being; mercy demands higher standards. But this wars against our pride and violates the condition of our fallen

nature. Our ability to show mercy wars against our ability to receive mercy which wars against our ability to be merciful. The walls go up; we construct barriers keeping people and their troubles out - they become objects of gossip and ridicule.

The Dutch master, Rembrandt painted *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Henri Nouwen wrote a beautiful devotional reflecting on the painting. While writing the devotional he began to wonder how much mercy he had missed in his busy, controlled life. "Had I really ever dared to step into the center, kneel down, and let myself be held by a forgiving God, instead of choosing over and over again the position of outsider looking in?"¹ We have heard Christ, we hear him now in this beatitude – he begs us to cry for mercy and to give mercy, mercy that he abundantly provides and yet we draw back, we are cautious beings. We linger at the door, reticent to step across the threshold and join the party. Mercy abounds, but we are reluctant – reluctant to receive it reluctant to extend it.

Nouwen helps us with this – he says that there are many, many competing voices – loud, promising, seductive voices. They tell us, "Go out and prove that you are worth something." Have you heard these voices? They quickly burrow down into the very recesses of our being, they haunt us, they cause us doubt our worth; they whisper to us almost is a hiss of a whisper saying - we can never achieve enough, we'll never be good enough. These are voices that wrap what we do around who we are and cruelly whisper lies to us. These voices tell us that we are never going to be loved unless we earn it. They demand that we prove we are worth loving. They deny that love is a totally free gift.

"And so these ruminations rumble through our souls all day long largely undetected but never far beneath the surface."² We find ourselves within constant earshot of the One who said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy," and yet we just can't, we can't draw close. There is something within us, perhaps we have trusted before only to have that trust betrayed; we still feel the sting of betrayal. Perhaps we have been told by those we trust that we'll never be good enough; we still doubt our worth. Maybe we compare ourselves with others and know that we'll never be as good as they are; always second class. Perhaps ... just perhaps – but Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

¹ Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, page 12

² Howell, 64

Mercy is just too far from us if we believe the messages that bombard us. Ad campaigns are tantalizing tempting and illusive – “you deserve only the best – the best car, the best hair coloring, the best week of your life on the best vacation you have ever imagined.” These advertisements don’t know me; but they drive me away from mercy, which has absolutely nothing to do with being deserving.

We live with an “entitlement” mentality – I am owed a good life and if I don’t get it, I have permission to blame someone, anyone. So mercy is a stranger. Even when we speak of heaven, we speak of one having deserved it, earned it. How often have we had a conversation like this: “Well ole Ms. Such and Such passed away. They were so active in the church. If anyone deserves to go to heaven it will be them. Look at all they did.” As if heaven had a “For Sale” sign posted at the pearly gates.

So what is mercy? It’s not something that we can define so much as it is something that we know intuitively – something for which we often cry out for in desperation. A child on the play ground who is about to be beaten up by the schoolyard bully and what does the bully make him say out loud – “Uncle” a child’s translation of “mercy.” Or, you have made an awful decision, a terrible one – one that has derailed and ruined what was a well planned and arranged life. There is no strategy that can get you out of this mess the only cry left is “Mercy.” You ponder Jesus on the cross, you consider his acts of love, his sacrifice, his obedience and it finally burrows down into the marrow of your being. It finally gets you and you get it and you realize that the only response is a cry for “Mercy.”

Deep down inside we know our need for it and we crave it – mercy. That Jesus would love us, despite what we do. The only offering for His grace, his mercy is for us to be merciful. But it is so hard. Blessed are the merciful because they will receive ... We are not open to mercy, we are a stiff necked people, wanting not what we deserve but what we want, we want others to get what they deserve but not us. Jesus anticipated this in his prayer, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtor.” Forgive as we forgive; the merciful shall receive mercy.”

JRR Tolkien captures this in *The Lord of the Rings*, especially when Frodo wishes Gollum were dead. Gandalf replies,

“Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to

deal out death in judgment ... I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up in the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when it comes the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many – yours not the least. In any case we did not kill him: he is very old and very wretched.”

How hard is it to be merciful?³ It requires action; it is not doing - nothing. The root word in Greek suggests a pouring out the way we pour something from a bottle. Mercy is pouring out. Mercy is when I take what is precious to me and pour it out for you. We may not think that we have much to pour out, our bottle is less than half full, but we pour anyway, thinking only of the wounded one who needs “the healing balm of mercy.” Bonhoeffer captures it when he noted how beleaguered Jesus’ listeners were in this Sermon on the Mount

As if their own needs and their own distress were not enough, they take it upon themselves the distress and humiliation and sin of others. They have an irresistible love for the downtrodden, the sick, the wretched, the wronged, the outcast, and all who are tortured with anxiety. No distress is too great, no sin too appalling for their pity. If any man falls into disgrace, the merciful will sacrifice their own honor to shield him, and take shame upon themselves. In order that they may be merciful, they cast away the most priceless treasure of human life, their personal dignity and honor. For the only honor and dignity they know is their Lord’s own mercy, to which they alone owe their very lives.⁴

The merciful are less interested in their own honor than in mercy, for their only honor is mercy. The merciful do not get bogged down in the muck and mire of who deserves what – they focus upon the cross of Jesus Christ and know that they pour out mercy because Jesus Christ poured out mercy.

This is totally radical – mercy frees us from self-centeredness. We can’t fix all that is wrong in the world – we can’t. However, we do what we can and we pray that others will come along and do likewise. Mercy demands that we give up judging; believing instead in God in whom there is perfect justice. God demands of us mercy.

³ Howell, 65

⁴ The Cost of Discipleship, 124-125

In the story we read today of the "Good Samaritan" – the Samaritan didn't stand wondering why the man on the side of the road got into the fix he was in. He did stand in judgment judging him stupid or ill fated. He didn't look at his watch; consult his Palm pilot to see if he could fit this mugged and beaten soul into his schedule – he was merciful.

Be merciful – otherwise we wonder through life merely in earshot of Jesus, never getting close to the one who said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." When we show mercy, we show respect. When we pour out mercy, we shed dignity on those whose self-respect and dignity has been stripped from them. Mercy does not spout forth answers and judgment like Job's friends – mercy is the love of Jesus, pour out to be a soothing balm for a festering wound.

As we receive mercy and show mercy, our hearts are purged and we are awestruck to glimpse into the purity that can only come in by the perfect purity of Jesus. Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Amen.