

“Mercy”

A homily by The Rev. Sb. AJ Jonah Buckley
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This week’s bible passages are challenging. There seems to be a theme of mercy throughout the readings, but it doesn’t always look like or happen as we might expect it to happen. When we look at Jesus’ behavior in the gospel lesson, and then look at Joseph’s behavior in the Genesis reading, it sure looks like Joseph is acting more Godly than Jesus. Joseph shows mercy to his brothers who are suffering in a famine and promises to provide for the family (even though they had left him in a pit and sold him into slavery). But, Jesus....hears the cries of anguish for mercy, and ignores the woman.

Yes, we could rationalize it and say that “he was testing her faith.” Or “he was teaching the disciples a lesson.” And the thing is I don’t and can’t know why Jesus responds this way... I can only make observations based on the story in this passage.

But, regardless of any interruptions or unpleasantness, at the end of all these difficult readings, mercy is given and received; Her daughter is healed. She had so many things stacked against her, and, yet, mercy is a powerful force.

Mercy is greater than hate, than revenge, than anger, than prejudice. So, yes, these readings challenge us, but they show us that there are no boundaries to God’s mercy. It is for everyone. Even those who would have been considered sworn enemies, such as the Canaanites. Not even that can get in the way of God’s mercy.

Maybe it’s not about the road to mercy, but that we get there, in the end. It gives me hope in a way to see the realness of this depiction of Jesus; that he was in a time and place and context and was both fully God and fully human, and all the baggage that comes with that. But, there’s something about this encounter, something about the way he’s thinking or his mood, that leads him to ignore her, and then insult her.

I think what bothers me most is that, yes, eventually Jesus IS merciful to this woman, but this passage seems to treat mercy as conditional. Depending on the strength on her faith. And I wonder if we don’t sometimes feel the same...

How often do our pleas to God seem to meet with silence?
How often do we shout to God, how long O lord, how long and nothing seems to change?

Our biases and prejudices distort mercy. It leads us to focus on our mistaken belief that someone is undeserving, and not on their suffering and need for mercy. That’s the thing about true mercy; there are no prerequisites. Mercy does not require that we be deserving or the mercy be merited in any way. That’s what makes it mercy.

It is not transactional.

The most common response to tragedy is “Lord, have mercy.”

What does it mean to be merciful?

What exactly are we asking God when we cry out for mercy?

Mercy is "love that responds to human need in an unexpected or unmerited way."

It is compassion in action. It is what "gets us out of trouble." It always sides with the suffering.

Examples of asking for mercy in the Bible often come in the form of someone pleading with Jesus for healing, for an end to suffering. It's probably the most commonly recorded conversation between humanity and God is our plea for mercy and God granting it. As the psalms say "God's mercy endures forever."

Mercy is grounded in our belief that God is bigger, more powerful, than us and chooses to intervene in our lives. And God is bigger and more powerful.

And God does intervene.

There is a power dynamic when it comes to pleading for mercy, for intervention.

The one who is in a position of helplessness is the one asking the one with the power to change the situation to do something about it. Mercy is the form God's intervention takes. Outside of the average church service where we say "Lord have mercy" at every chance we get, mercy is often cried out for when there is only despair and hopelessness.

When something's gotta change. When things cannot go on as they are. Asking for mercy is a bearing of our heart, a choice to be vulnerable.

Having mercy for someone is also withholding punishment. This is the case with Joseph and his treatment of his brothers. It's choosing not to avenge or be vindictive. Choosing mercy instead.

The human need for mercy is a great equalizer. We all stand in the same place before God.

Charles Spurgeon once wrote that "God's mercy is so great that you may sooner drain the sea of its water, or deprive the sun of its light, or make space too narrow, than diminish the great mercy of God."

Joseph could have punished his brothers, but he chooses to help them instead; this is mercy in action. Mercy is communal. Mercy is dynamic. It requires a giver and a receiver.

We suffer injustices. Mercy is the antidote. Our ability to ask for and receive mercy requires humility, which can only be given to us from outside ourselves.

Mercy is also about second chances. The opportunity to make up for our mistakes.

And, in this case, I wonder if the Canaanite woman is giving Jesus mercy, in a way, when she gives him a second chance to have compassion on her. The Canaanite woman's daughter is given a second chance when she is healed. Joseph is given a second chance. Joseph's family is given a second chance.

Our God is a God of second chances and third and fourth and zillionth chances... I think that's what mercy is about. It is always offered, always available. Suffering is never the only option. No matter the interruptions or unpleasantness, the way of mercy, both the giving and receiving, is offered to us as children of God.

So when hardship and anxiety break your heart,
Call upon God whose mercy endures forever.
And when you behold the suffering of the world -
The sick, the suffering, the desperate Canaanite mothers of the world -
Go and do likewise.
Give the mercy that you have received.
This, I believe, is how, at the end of all ends, love triumphs over fear.
Amen.