

MERCY Reading: Exodus 33:12-23 Proper 24/A 10-18-20
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“Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations: Preserve the works of your mercy, that your Church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your Name...” (Opening Collect; BCP 235)

Mercy! Mercy is something that is in short supply today. Mercy is showing compassion or forgiveness towards someone whom it is within one’s power to punish or harm. Mercy is an act of kindness that springs forth from a generous heart. Mercy comes from the French word, *merci*, which means thank you. In Hebrew, mercy encompasses acts of loving kindness, steadfast love, and forgiveness. Mercy is the subject of today’s sermon.

I want you to pause for a moment and try to remember the covenant you or your parents made when first married: “To love, comfort, and honor one another, in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, and being faithful as long as you both shall live.” Then imagine your spouse or one of your parents being unfaithful and breaking the marriage covenant. Think of the pain that it would cause. Would you be able to forgive? Would you have mercy on your partner? Would you hold resentments for the rest of your life? Would you seek after a divorce?

This is the dilemma that God struggles with in today’s lesson from the Book of Exodus. The people of Israel have broken the covenant they had made with God by worshipping a golden calf. As you might remember, the first two commandments of the covenant were: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.” (Exodus 20) So, early on in their journey, the Israelites now have 2 strikes against them.

In today’s reading (which is post-calf), Moses begs God not to abandon the people of Israel because of their unfaithfulness. After a period of bargaining, God tells Moses: OK. “I will make all my goodness pass before you...I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” The people of Israel then resume their journey to the promised Land, supported and held by God’s mercy and presence.

Embracing a posture of mercy is not something that comes naturally to most of us because we are not biologically programmed for it. Instead, we are hardwired to fight or flight, to give tit for tat, to look out for #1 first and foremost. We get weary of those who screw up and do not do their part. We have a tendency to hold onto old hurts, justifying our anger and refusing to let go. We prefer being right over being loving. In summary, we prefer retributive justice over mercy. And yet if God’s mercy is always a little bit greater than God’s justice, shouldn’t we too take on the mantle of mercy?

I remember the time I was shown mercy by a complete stranger. I was going to school full-time and my resources were scarce. I was running low on groceries and so I asked my roommate to borrow her car to stock up on goods. While backing out her car from the grocery store, I heard a thump and realized that I had hit the rear quarter panel of the car next to me. It was then that I remembered that my roommate had not paid her car insurance. My heart began to beat loudly and I became fearful that I would have to pay a hefty bill. I wrote my phone number on a piece of paper with the words, “I hit your car” and placed it on the windshield. I then returned home and waited.

I had been brought up in culture which counted, measured, judged, and punished those who offended. So when the call came, I held my breath and waited for my sentence. Would he yell at me? Would he demand immediate payment? Would he negotiate a monthly payment plan? To my surprise, the owner was not aware of the damage to his car. When I explained the situation, he told me to “hold on” and went into his garage to take a look. When he returned, he simply said: “Don’t worry about it. It’s not that bad.” Mercy! Mercy can wipe away a debt that is owed, giving the offender a 2nd chance to thrive.

Ten years later while sitting in my car in a school parking lot, I heard a thump as my car shook. I looked in my rear-view mirror and noticed a car had hit my rear bumper. As I got out of the car to review the damage, I saw a harried father who had just dropped his child off at school. He was shaking his head and looking forlorn. I looked at the bumper and then at the father and said: “Don’t worry about it. It’s not that bad.” Mercy begets mercy. Mercy, kicks into the universe a new trajectory that brings light into the darkness. “A little bit of mercy makes the world less cold and more just.” *(Pope Francis)* And so we pray: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” *(The Lord’s Prayer)*

Embracing acts of compassion is another aspect of Mercy. When we come face to face with our own suffering and have compassion for ourselves, it becomes easier to have mercy on others who are in pain. Enzo Mallorca, an Italian diver, was swimming next his boat in the sea of Syracuse when he felt something slightly hit his back. He turned and saw a dolphin who was trying to express something. When the dolphin dove, Enzo followed him. 12 meters below, he saw another dolphin trapped in an abandoned net. He quickly surfaced, grabbed his daughter and diving knives, and returned. Soon, the two of them managed to free the dolphin who issued an almost human cry at the end of the ordeal. In another 10 minutes, the dolphin would have died from lack of oxygen. The released dolphin was helped to the surface when the surprise came: she was pregnant! The male dolphin circled them, and then stopped in front of Enzo, touched his cheek (like a kiss), in a gesture of gratitude. Then they both swam off. Acts of mercy offer a chance for new life and new possibilities!

Electrician John Kinney responded to a call when Gloria Scott flipped on a light switch in her kitchen. Sparks flew out of an overhead fixture, tripping her circuit breaker. Her house was in total disrepair. After fixing the problem and getting her lights to work, Kinney returned home. However, he could not stop thinking about Gloria living in that dilapidated home. It made him sad to think of her sitting alone in a house that needed so many repairs. The following Monday, Kinney returned to Gloria’s home with an offer: “I have a lot of friends — how about if I put together a group to come over and help you fix things up around here? It will not cost you anything.” Gloria was both shocked and delighted with the offer. Kinney posted a go-fund-me page and in less than a month, raised \$115,000.

His construction buddies stepped up to the plate. These volunteers who came to his aid became known as “Gloria’s Gladiators.” Today, this movement of generosity and outreach has extended across the country. Mercy now has a new name: “Gloria’s Gladiators.” These “Gladiators” (which now number more than 15,000 members from coast to coast) are performing acts of mercy which not only supports those in need but lifts up the people who participate. Mercy begets mercy and kicks into the universe a new, life-giving trajectory. “A little bit of mercy makes the world less cold and more just.” Mercy is a blessing to those on whom it is bestowed and is also a blessing on those who freely offer it. Mercy and forgiveness are the whole gospel. “Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.” (Matthew 5:7)

Mercy describes the ministry shown by Mother Teresa and the Sisters of Mercy who perform incredible acts of service to the poor and the destitute. Mercy touched the heart of Nelson Mandela, who after 27 years of imprisonment showed forgiveness towards the people who had held him prisoner. His leadership led to the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which has helped the South African people to peacefully come to terms with their troubled past of Apartheid. Mercy includes the forgiveness bestowed by those who had lost family members when Dylan Roof walked into Emanuel African Methodist-Episcopal Church in South Carolina, opened fire, and murdered nine people. Because of this remarkable posture of forgiveness, Emanuel church who once had difficulty filling its pews, is now overflowing with folks who want to witness and touch the hem of mercy’s garment.

Mercy is one of the defining characteristics of God. Mercy includes clemency, benevolence, pity, forbearance, compassion, forgiveness, and the giving of alms and service. It includes missions of mercy to the hungry, the poor, the prisoner, and to those who are suffering in body and mind. Mercy gives hope to those who receive it and frees us from past mistakes. And while there is often little we can

do on a global scale to affect the current chaos and pain in our world, we always have the power to stretch out our arms of mercy and bestow compassion on those within our reach.

Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy.