

Mercy, Psalm 145: 8-14
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July 3, 2011

Introduction

There is always some curiosity as to where sermon ideas and series come from. I'm not even sure myself how I chose to speak today and the next three Sunday on the salutation from Jude 2: "May mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance." Those all are terms that you hear 'most every Sunday and yet are only loosely defined. We are supposed to just know what they mean, how we get them and how we give them to others. "Thinking Theologically" was a seminary class I had to take. It was intimidating just because of the name! Theology, the study of God can seem too lofty. It doesn't have to be. Instead, let's keep it practical and gentle. Like the word mercy.

In Jude 2 there are three separate hopes in the salutation- the greeting that opens the letter. They are translated "mercy, peace and love" with the qualifier/quantifier "in abundance". May they be yours! Language is complicated, but it can make for a fun afternoon if you like to hunt through Greek, Hebrew and theology dictionaries. These words have a lot of meaning so sometimes the translations are different. I love this greeting! Maybe I'll start beginning all my conversations and letters this way: "May mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance!" Isn't that a wonderful thing to want for others, (and for ourselves)!

Defining mercy

Mercy: leniency and compassion shown toward an offender by a person or agency charged with administering justice. To alleviate distress, to be kind and forgiving, compassion, clemency. It's a demonstration of love. A couple Hebrew words are translated "mercy" in the Old Testament. The one from Psalm 145 is ***racham***, and is to have mercy, to love deeply, to be compassionate, to show tender affection. Its root is related to the word for womb, so by implication, it is a feminine character trait for God. No offense gentlemen, but defense lawyers want women on the jury.

In the New Testament the word is **eleos**, which translates as mercy, pity, or compassion. It's an active verb. Something that actually happens! My NIV study Bible says God's mercy *fre*es us from guilt and the power of sin, through Christ. God "does not treat us as our sins deserve, for mercy wins out over anger and judgment" (James 2:13).

Getting mercy

The use of the word MERCY is consistent in Old Testament and the New. It's an attribute of God. We receive mercy from God.

Here are some of the many verses in the Bible that speak of God's mercy toward us: "For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers which he confirmed to them by oath." God's mercy "frees us from guilt and the power of sin". God's mercy is described as "new every morning". God's anger lasts only a moment but God's favor lasts a lifetime, and beyond.

Part of the difficulty in accepting God's mercy is that our shame is also new every morning. In the epistle lectionary text for today we read that great disconnect in our attempts to live a holy life. Paul writes "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Romans 7:15, 18-19). The great apostle Paul was ashamed of himself.

Every time I hear those verses I remember a friend from middle school and high school. We shared a locker in high school for convenience. I was a bit of a preacher even then. I had an extra copy of "The Way" the first NT Living Bible translation, so I left it on her shelf. She finally asked about it, and later took it home. Now I have to say that she and I were friends, but didn't run in the same circles in high school. The last few years she had quite a reputation. One day, between classes, she brought the book, opened it and said: "Listen to this! 'It seems to be a fact of life that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. Who will free me from my slavery to this lower nature? Thank God! It

has been done by Jesus Christ our Lord. He has set me free.’ She said: “I thought Christians had to be perfect! That’s amazing. Jesus loves me, even when I do wrong?!” Ah, yes dear friend, dear friends. That’s mercy. We get that from God. She sits at Jesus’ feet now; she died of lymphoma before her 30th birthday.

She felt shame and she didn’t think she was God’s child, but she was. Shame is an old-fashioned concept. But, I think, in our minds we all carry a sense of failure and shame. I don’t know, maybe we’ve come to accept sin as inevitable. But like the early Christians, be advised: we don’t keep sinning to show that God’s mercy toward us abounds (Romans 6:1)! We keep trying, but like Paul we keep doing the same illogical or harmful things over and over. We are never going to totally overcome.

Most of us know what our personal stumbling block is. A psychology professor from Wheaton College, Dr. Michael Mangis may have been the first to call the concept “your Signature Sin”. It’s your personal struggle, that one thing that keeps getting you in trouble throughout your lifetime. It’s the fault that you try to overcome, but it keeps coming up over and over. For me it’s a food addiction. For you it’s some other vice, bad attitude or behavior, that like Paul, and like most of us, you keep doing even though you know better and want to avoid it.

I remember just a few years ago my Mom wrote out a note to her doctor at an appointment, outlining her questions for the visit. She also wrote that she had hesitated to come see him because she had gained weight and was ashamed. She was in her 80s. She had a life long struggle with her weight. She could barely accept herself; she felt like a constant failure. That’s not how God wants us to feel about ourselves. Mercy runs deep and alongside other Divine attributes: God is gracious, forgiving, compassionate, kind, loving.

Isaiah 55:7 “Turn to the Lord and he will have mercy... and will freely pardon.” Do you know that? Our relationship with God is not undone by the sin that frustrates us. The whole Bible says that God’s mercy comes on all, God is rich in mercy. Instead of hanging our heads in frustration and shame, the early Protestant Reformer, John Calvin suggested that Christ followers, when seeing

their “own unrighteousness, betakes (*himself*) themselves to God’s mercy alone, as the only haven of safety”. (2.8.3) Not a bad idea, 500 years ago or now.

When you fall, when you fail, take yourself to God for forgiveness and mercy.

Christian songwriter, Greg Long, penned it this way:

“As I’ve come see the weaker side of me
 I’ve realized his grace is what I need
 When sin demanded justice for my soul
 Mercy said no
 I’m not gonna let you go
 I’m not gonna let you slip away
 You don’t have to be afraid
 Mercy said no
 Sin will never take control
 Life and death stood face to face
 Darkness tried to steal my heart away
 Thank you Jesus
 Mercy said no.”

John Calvin’s writings also remind us of the second of the ten commandments (Exodus 20:4-5), and where “the largeness of God’s (*his*) mercy, ... extends to a thousand generations, while he has assigned only four generations to his vengeance” (2.8.21). God doesn’t do math like we do. God counts out mercy toward us many times, over and above the frustration that we cause with our stubborn, foolish or weak natures.

Rob Bell, in the book I am encouraging us to read this summer, “Love Wins” writes this about God’s mercy: “No matter how painful, brutal, oppressive, no matter how far people find themselves from home because of their sin, indifference, and rejection, there’s always the assurance that is won’t be this way *forever*.” (p. 86) He then quotes Lamentations 3: 21-23. “This I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness’. “ I ask that God’s mercy may be upon you, in abundance.

Giving mercy

Another principle of the Christian faith is that what we receive we should share with those around us, in the name of Christ. Just as God has been merciful to us, we are to be merciful to those around us. The mercy of God needs to be expressed in our interactions with others. It's also a consistent theme in both the Old and New Testaments. Micah (6:8) the prophet told the people in his day, the eighth century before Christ that: God "has shown all you people what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Jesus is recorded as having preached in the beatitudes (Matt 5:7) "blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." The PW are going to study the Beatitudes, from the gospel of Matthew, beginning in the fall. Margaret Aymer, the author of the Horizon Bible Study workbook, writes: "One who shows mercy feels emotion when faced with the pain of another, takes action on behalf of that person, and demonstrates ongoing dedication to that person, beyond the initial crisis." That's how we show mercy.

My Mom's doctor showed her mercy. After her note that day he never nagged her again about her weight. He is a man of faith. I know he often has to balance tough love with mercy. We all do. As followers of Jesus we give mercy when we don't judge another, when we forgive. Often the thing that really bugs us in someone else is also a flaw in our own character. And Jesus said: "The measure you use will be used against you."

Showing mercy is a spiritual gift in the list found in Romans 12. For some of us being merciful is easier than for others, but we are all asked to show mercy cheerfully. And Jesus said that the one among us who has never sinned should throw the first stone at the sinner. We were taught to pray: "Forgive us as we forgive others."

How do we show mercy? Do we open the jails and let everybody out? No, we go in and show love. Do we overlook the wayward teen like my friend? No, we help him or her to understand that God's ways are for our health and protection, of our bodies, minds and spirits.

Everyone deserves to be treated with mercy. If you get email your probably have heard this one. It's one of the best explanations of being merciful everyday. I'll read it like I've received it. The original author is unknown.

Heavenly Father, Help us remember that the jerk who cut us off in traffic last night is a single mother who worked nine hours that day and is rushing home to cook dinner, help with homework, do the laundry and spend a few precious moments with her children.

Help us to remember that the pierced, tattooed, disinterested young man who can't make change correctly is a worried 19-year-old college student, balancing his apprehension over final exams with his fear of not getting his student loans for next semester.

Remind us, Lord, that the scary looking bum, begging for money in the same spot every day is a slave to addictions that we can only imagine in our worst nightmares.

Help us to remember that the old couple walking annoyingly slow through the store aisles and blocking our shopping progress are savoring this moment, knowing that, based on the biopsy report she got back last week, this will be the last year that they go shopping together.

Heavenly Father, remind us each day that, of all the gifts you give us, the greatest gift is love. It is not enough to share that love with those we hold dear. Open our hearts not to just those who are close to us, but to all humanity. Let us be slow to judge and quick to forgive, show patience, empathy and love.

Amen

Hear this good news: "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made" (Psalm 145:8-9).

Thanks be to God!