

Blessed are the Merciful

Fourth in Lenten Sermon Series on the Beatitudes

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

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Psalm 32:1-5

¹Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

²Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. ³While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. ⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³So he told them this parable:

¹¹Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’” ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. ²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy. This fifth Beatitude is unique in that it is reflexive. While the *poor in spirit* receive the kingdom, and *the meek* inherit the earth, *those who show mercy* obtain exactly what they offer to others: mercy. The reward of mercy is mercy.

With this blessing of the merciful, there is also a turn here in the middle of the list of the Beatitudes. Some biblical scholars say the first half are the need Beatitudes. The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, and those who hunger for righteousness have a need that only God can fulfill. The latter half bestows the help Beatitudes because they describe things we do to help – being merciful, making peace, and getting persecuted for trying. The need Beatitudes show us how God helps those who cannot help themselves; and the help Beatitudes promise that God also favors those who try to help others. Now, that does not mean we earn the blessing of these help Beatitudes – they are still offered to us in the passive tense, but we can participate in the ways that God is merciful.

For a human community more measured by retaliation, revenge and retribution, God is turning the world upside down through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Christ, mercy ascends as a core value. Don Shriver said it this way: “There is a great, consistent reciprocity in God’s way of dealing with humanity: that is the message of the Beatitudes. The divine giving is closely aligned with the human receiving. You cannot have the wealth of mercy without spending it on your neighbor. It is one secret of the Kingdom of God... the mercy we need is both a gift and a power to imitate it.”¹

This truth is best conveyed in the story Jesus tells of the Prodigal Son, the older brother and the merciful father. Jesus invites us to weave in and out of this parable, to try on the various roles, and to step into the footsteps of each character. We know the contours of this story, because we have walked through every scene. We all know about sibling rivalry and inheritance

¹ Don Shriver, “Blessed Are the Merciful,” *Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 2019, p. 27.

disputes. We know about running away and facing the consequences of lavish living. We know about becoming desperate for the forgiveness of another. We know what it is like to be the older brother simmering in our self-absorbed resentment. We also know what it's like to recognize our need to ask for forgiveness, as Luke says of the Prodigal, "He came to himself."

Henri Nouwen wrote about how he always held the Prodigal at arm's length until he reflected on Rembrandt's famous painting of this scene. The disheveled son is on his knees; his face pressed sideways into his father's long robes, his father's welcoming embrace of hands upon his shoulders pulls him in toward his heart, his love and mercy. The painting provoked Nouwen to wonder how much mercy he had missed in his busy and controlled life asking: "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 the outsider looking in." ²

Friends, it is when we recognize ourselves the prodigal – that we discover the extravagant waste of our blessings is far out-distanced by God's welcome when we return for God's mercy, forgiveness and grace. I imagine many of you remember the movie "Amazing Grace" about the British member of Parliament, William Wilberforce, who led that country to abolish the slave trade. The movie's title, of course, comes from the hymn written by John Newton who was an ordained minister and pastor to Wilberforce. Having gone to sea with his father as a boy, John Newton had been a slave trader himself, captain of a ship that transported African people to port where they were sold to the highest bidder. In 1748 he was caught in a storm at sea and experienced a spiritual awakening. To use Luke's words, "he came to himself;" he saw the evils of slavery, and recognized his own complicity in the bitter suffering of the African people. He gave himself to Christ and was ordained at the age of 40 by the Church of England despite a lack of formal theological education.

² Nouwen quoted in James Howell, *The Beatitudes for Today*, p. 29, 63.

In the movie about Wilberforce and his work to turn the hearts and minds of England, there is a scene with Albert Finney playing the elderly pastor John Newton. He cannot bring himself to talk about his slave trading years until late in life when blinded by age, he is found by Wilberforce to be dictating his memoirs as a sort of confession. “I live in the company of 20 thousand ghosts,” he tells his young protégé, referring to the Africans he treated so brutally while transporting them to Jamaica over the course of two decades. Then, John Newton summarizes his life with this simple declaration: “All that I know,” he says, “is I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior.”³

His hymn, “Amazing Grace,” recounts that conversion “that saved a wretch like me” from the evils of slave trading to a life committed to Christ. All I know is I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior. It is that kind of conversion that Jesus was hoping to a live in his listeners’ hearts, when he spun this tale of the Prodigal Son’s return and the merciful father. When it is within our power to harm, to retaliate, to punish or to withhold forgiveness, Jesus wants to convert us to mercy, to recognize our sin and our need for God’s mercy, and then to live the compassionate life of extending forgiveness ourselves. He tells this parable so that we will come to ourselves, that we will discover something about the amazing nature of God, and in turn share God’s nature with others. For, in the mercy offered to us by God through Christ we are welcomed home.

No matter how far we may have run to get away, no matter how sinful we have been, when we turn toward God there is always mercy, an outstretched welcome for our coming home. As our closing hymn puts it so eloquently: *There would I find a settled rest, while others go and come; no more a stranger, or a guest, but like a child at home.*

You know, Jesus is honest in his telling of this story about how hard life in relationship can be, how the dividing of an inheritance can cause such painful division in a family, how sibling rivalry is writ large across the pages

³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, quoted by Howell, p. 65.

of our lives, how alienated we can become from a parent, a child, from one another, how desperate our need for reconciliation can be. It's all here in this parable. Jesus tells it like it really is in these complicated lives or ours, but something extraordinary is also interwoven in the fabric of this familiar tale. At the point when the Prodigal comes to himself and heads for home, there is a merciful welcome, a showering of abundant forgiveness and grace. There comes the signet ring – a sign of belonging to the family again, and finest robe and sandals – symbols of restoration into the household. A feast is held big enough to host the whole town.

The parable, you see, broadens the scope of God's mercy to encompass everyone around. The Greek word for *mercy* has the connotation of being poured out. Mercy is a *pouring* out. When we recognize the blessing of God's mercy we become more merciful ourselves, for when it is given by God it is meant to be offered to others.

Noting how beleaguered Jesus' listeners must have been in the context of their world - hell bent on getting only what you deserve, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "As if their own needs and their own distress were not enough, they take upon themselves the distress of others. They have an irresistible love for the downtrodden, the sick, 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 his shame upon themselves... For the only honor and dignity they know is their Lord's own mercy, to which alone they owe their very lives." The extravagant gift of God's mercy is a help Beatitude. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are compelled to extend it and to share it no matter how hard that can be.

In his poem "The Star-Splitter," Robert Frost shows how – once our own need for mercy is recognized – how we cannot help but offer it to another. It is a narrative poem about a farmer who becomes fascinated with gazing at the stars. In desperation to buy a telescope he burns down his own house for the insurance money. All the neighbors come to know his lie and resent his stealing as if from them with a false insurance claim. At first they shun him

with their “mean laughter” but then they come around to have this second thought:

*The first thing next morning we reflected
If one by one we counted people out
For the least sin, it wouldn't take us long
To get so we had no one left to live with,
For to be social is to be forgiving.*

To be social is to be forgiving. To be family is to be forgiving. To be children of the Kingdom of God is to be first forgiven, and by then by God's grace to show that same compassion, forgiveness and mercy we have received from God to others.

Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy.

AMEN.