

Mercy: Tender and Severe
The Rev. Dr. Martha Tucker
February 24, 2019

Blessed be God who animates our lives and nurtures us in mercy all the days of our lives. Amen

Love your enemies, do good to those who harm you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

Most of us are familiar with this opening line in Luke's Gospel for today, a continuation of the sermon on the plain, about loving our enemies. and Most of us have a very difficult time with that instruction. Feels a lot like a woe instead of a blessing! Difficult in and of itself and also difficult to find in its explication of turning the other cheek etc. a feeling of justice or non victimization, which we know is also important in the Kingdom of God. God's blessing cannot be about victimization!

It seems to me that whenever we might be confused by scripture we need to read it in context...the context of Jesus Christ. That context is always one of Love as the Collect would suggest. Whatever story, parable or sermon offered, it must conform or further the two great commandments: Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy mind and with all thy soul. The second is like unto it: Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself.

On these hang ALL the law and the prophets...

Moreover, whatever beatitude or admonition/woe given is always in furtherance of God's mission and the Incarnation. That we might know life more abundantly. That we might love one another as Christ demonstrated love for us.

With this in mind it seems to me that the line which points us to the ultimate context in this part of the sermon on the plain is BE MERCIFUL just as your Father is merciful.

Be merciful as your God is merciful

We who are made in God's image are to live into our call to be merciful creatures and we Learn and Know this mercy from the mercy offered to us by God....always

I suggest that if we focus on the merciful line, and spend a little time following mercy through Scripture and story we might land on an enlightening context for the reaction to injury which is not a blind offering but wholly intentional: here hit the other cheek is rather a shift in perspective, toward a divine perspective, that whatever you do to me will be met with mercy and compassion instead of mere retaliation.

Mercy and compassion must be compatible and translatable into that fundamental rubric of love which is G0d's mission

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So what is mercy? is it a form of love? yes. a form of compassion? yes. a form of grace? yes.

Mercy is as one hymn suggests never ceasing, like grace.
It is compassionate in its tender feeling with and it envelopes us
It is chesed, kinship love.
It is directed and accurate and encompassing

There is a wideness to God's mercy like the wideness of the sea

Mercy is a name for God! It is eternal and nested in our divine creation.
And as Thomas Merton says: Mercy within mercy within mercy!

In my fascination for mercy, witness my signature line from Micah: To do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God...I have come to understand a most critical and life changing derivative of the word mercy! It helps me locate mercy in a cosmic way.

The Hebrew word for mercy rachamim or the verb rachem is derived directly from the word rechem which means WOMB. Mercy is the womb of God where we are nurtured and fed as a mother would her child in utero.

Mercy then is eternally and divinely linked to God's identity as not only father but mother. It is our language and its limitations which disallow this expansive meaning too often.

Just imagine us swimming in a sea of deep mercy as a fetus might in amniotic fluid. We are enveloped, surrounded, buoyed by this fluid mercy.

This past week I have been collecting stories of mercy, given and received. I have been awed by the countless examples of kindness and tenderness as well as severe mercy. We certainly see it in the Bible, the sparing of Isaac, the words of Jesus toward the thief on the cross.

We witness mercy in the stories of pastoral care near death. My own experience has been blessed with that intimacy of praying the 23rd psalm with an apparently unconscious person only to have their mouth open or have my hand gently squeezed.

I have recalled the stories of death row inmates who have developed relationships with God carriers as in Dead Man Walking where mercy comes in the form of forgiveness and conversion. Where a belonging to Christ's beloved community transcends the prison walls and even the death chamber.

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And I was caught up short by the story of two WWII pilots who upon looking out the cockpit window were staring into a German fighter plane and closed their eyes to accept death only to open them again and see the face of God in their enemy relax and fly by with no shots.

Ultimately, I have shed tears as I recalled the story witnessed in a waiting room of a mother and child, a child who due to a neurological disease, was unable to respond or control her limbs. As they waited for the doctor the mother continually stroked the child's face and spoke gently to her. I love you, I love you, I love you.

Merciful forgiveness, merciful sparing, merciful kindness, merciful tenderness

I cannot describe it more clearly than the stories themselves demonstrate. Mercy is invisible but palpable, tender and severe.

Mercy shows up, sometimes embodied by humans, often by creatures in nature, as a felt presence of The Divine. Even in the midst, or most likely in the midst, of suffering and darkness, mercy pierces the shroud and pours tender grace on the wounds.

Mercy is the motivator of forgiveness

Mercy is the motivator of accompaniment of the poor, the sick the helpless

Mercy is the creator of pastoral compassion

when mercy is given or received an eternal peace and grace is realized.
mercy transcends violence, enmity, anger and fear

mercy transforms life's moments and relationships into peace, love, and understanding

So in the end, all this mercy language and mercy stories are only expressable in the language of womb, amniotic fluid, nurturance, and birth. God is always nurturing us with the grace of mercy that we might be ultimately born again into an eternal union.:

God's mission is mercy. Our ministries are only Christian and effective if also done in the stream of God's mercy. If we practice what Jesus commands us to, be merciful as our God is merciful.

While God's merciful mission and our merciful ministries are greater than, wider than, and more powerful than we have language for, in the end it may be the identity of God toward which we are being drawn and called.

So I close with a poem which though entitled kindness, one of the synonyms for Mercy, might as well be entitled Mercy:

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Kindness by Naomi Shihab Nye

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.

What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know

how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

Then it is only mercy that makes sense any more...the tender gravity of mercy!

1 There's a wideness in God's mercy,

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like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice
which is more than liberty.

2 There is no place where earth's sorrows
are more keenly felt than heaven:
there is no place where earth's failings
have such gracious judgement given.

3 There is plentiful redemption
through the blood that Christ has shed;
there is joy for all the members
in the sorrows of the head.

4 For the love of God is broader
than the measure of our mind;
and the heart of the eternal
is most wonderfully kind.

5 If our love were but more simple,
we should take him at his word;
and our lives would be illumined,
by the glory of the Lord.

Frederick William Faber (1814-1863) and Jubilate Hymns
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