

Mercy

Life in the Spirit, Part 4

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
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Psalm 108

¹Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

²Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits— ³who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, ⁴who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, ⁵who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. ⁷He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. ⁸The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. ⁹He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. ¹⁰He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. ¹¹For as the

heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; ¹²as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. ¹³As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.

Mark 10:46-52

⁴⁶They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. ⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁸Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁹Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” ⁵⁰So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” ⁵²Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Lord have mercy. It's probably my most frequently repeated prayer. And that's not because we are of the liturgical tradition that sings Kyrie Eleison every Sunday. I am just in the habit of saying it often.

Lord have mercy. I pray that prayer with great reverence and deep faith. I admit I also say that prayer sometimes with irreverent sarcasm, even though I grew up under the warning that if I took the Lord's name in vain I'd have my mouth washed out with soap. It never happened but the threat always hovered.

Lord have mercy. Recently, I have prayed that prayer in stunned silence at the plight of the people in Guatemala, whose village I have visited, which is now covered in volcanic ash. This week, with so many of you, I prayed, "Lord have mercy," as I wept before the images of people held in large metal cages on our country's border, and at the sounds of crying immigrant children taken away from their families – and just imagining the babies and toddlers and girls we have not seen.

Lord have mercy. I have prayed that prayer – hearing the testimony of their grief stricken mothers and fathers, and the uncertainty about how families will be reunited with their children who have been flown all over this country.

Lord have mercy, I prayed when I read about the two baby boys, who at 8 months and 11 months, were flown in the middle of the night from Texas to Grand Rapids, Michigan, of all places, where so many immigrant children have landed in foster care. ¹

Friends, we can have civil disagreement on how to deal with the challenges of immigration, but these recent months of separating children from their parents cannot be justified by people, who believe in the God today's Psalm describes, as the one who "works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed; the Lord who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

¹ USA Today, 6/20/18.

Lord have mercy upon our elected leaders who have the power to turn from this evil separation of families and legislate justice, and Lord have mercy upon our complicity in the plight of so many people in in Central America on the run from violence and poverty. We are complicit – you know – going back through decades of our nation’s involvement with Central American governments and American corporate interests there.

I traveled in Guatemala some time ago with one of our denomination’s mission co-workers, Anne Sayre. For part of the trip we stayed in homes, and I was privileged to spend a few days with a family and experience what their life was like. They were by no means the poorest of the poor – they had an indoor latrine, and running water although it was cold. They extended great hospitality by splitting the one bed for the family of six, and giving me the box springs of their bed to sleep on with clean sheets over the wooden slats. I woke each morning grateful to be off the floor but daily - sore from the wooden slats.

I took a walk one day with the oldest young adult daughter of the family, and when we rounded a corner we came upon a large facility. It had a huge fence around it covered with barbed wire. I asked Camilla what it was, and she explained that inside they grew flowers – but that the work conditions were cruel, and the pay was not nearly enough to live on. She said, only the most desperate people in that village worked for the company that send cut flowers grown there to the United States.

We are justified in our rage at what we have witnessed this last week, and we also carry some measure of complicity – living a First World lifestyle that is often born on the backs of the Third World. There are many forms of blindness. We have all seen a blind eye turned toward the trauma of families on the border – by people we entrust to work for a more civil and just society. Separating these children and parents, and now having no discernable plan to reunite them is evil. We also have our own blind spots to the injustices of which we are a part.

Blind Bartimaeus helps us see our need for mercy. Mercy is one of the Bible's weightiest words. In Hebrew – the word is *hesed* – and it means *mercy, loving-kindness, love, loyalty, and faithfulness*. The New Testament word for mercy refers to the emotion aroused by contact with undeserved suffering. Mercy exhibited by Jesus and his followers is compassion, that deeply felt love for fellow human beings, and a share in their suffering. In both the Old and New Testaments divine and human mercy are closely associated with justice and righteousness worked out in human relationships, especially among those who are oppressed and in need. ²

As Anne Lamott writes in her most recent book about rediscovering mercy, “Mercy means compassion, empathy, a heart for someone’s troubles. It’s not something you do – it is something in you, accessed, revealed, or cultivated through use, like a muscle.” ³ Admittedly sometimes it is easier to recognize what mercy is not. It is not merciful to take a child out of her father’s arms in Texas and put her on an airplane to New York to be taken into foster care. It is not merciful to separate children from their parents with no clear plan on how to reunite them. It is not merciful to turn a blind eye to the homeless on our city streets. It is not merciful to pretend that we are the experts when it comes to showing mercy.

Mercy is a gift born of God’s kindness and abounding, steadfast love. And I strongly believe it is one of God’s gifts that is given to each one of us. There is more than enough need in our community and world to call each one of us to find it within ourselves and to practice it daily. Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”

Using Anne Lamott’s image, it would appear that our Mercy Muscles need exercise these days, and the Healing of Blind Bartimaeus has something to teach us about God’s mercy and how to share it. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me,” he cried out when he heard the crowd and disciples passing

² *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, p. 626.

³ Anne Lamott, *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy*, p. 51.

by. They tried to shut him up, but he shouted even louder, “Have mercy on me!” It’s interesting that Jesus looked at him and said, “What do you want me to do for you?” Shouldn’t Jesus have already known what Bartimaeus wanted? This was not an anonymous blind beggar. He had a name. He was always sitting at the city gate of Jericho. He was like the homeless guy you see downtown, always at the same intersection. Folks knew his family.

The son of Timaeus, blind, begging, at the same spot as yesterday, the day before, and the day before that. Jesus must have known who he was, and figured out exactly what he wanted without a second thought. Nonetheless, Jesus asked Bartimaeus, “What do you want?” because he was after an answer that was bigger than physical healing, as great as that would be. “What do you want me to do for you?” is the question at the center of this story that echoes down through the ages, in the hearing of each of us who seeks the living God in Jesus Christ.

What do you want? We come here, into the presence of God because there is always something we want or need. In a church this large, I am sure we are looking for different things... direction, forgiveness, healing, a word of outrage at injustice... a word of grace, the assurance of God’s love... a place to raise the children in faith, companionship among folks with similar values, a way to serve and to make a difference. What blind Bartimaeus does for all of us is shout to Jesus on our behalf, from our imperfect, broken, and less than merciful lives, and admit for us that we too are standing in need of the mercy of the living God. And then Bartimaeus – once his sight is restored, starts following Jesus, and thereby helps us find our place in the crowd who will follow along his way.

Considering the need for more mercy and compassion that might propel the church to work more boldly for justice, Jim Wallace has written: “At times I think the truest image of God today is a black inner-city grandmother in the United States or a mother of the disappeared in Argentina or the women who wake up early to make tortillas in refugee camps. They all weep for their children and in their compassionate tears arises the political action that

changes the world. The mothers show us that it is the experience of touching the pain of others that is the key to change.”⁴

Friends, we have a lot to learn from Bartimaeus about mercy. We cannot turn a blind eye to the pain of the world. We should be bold to shout to God, “Lord have mercy upon the oppressed – and Lord, have mercy upon us.” Then with Bartimaeus, we are called to be brave to follow Jesus where a world of need is begging for us to show mercy; to right the current evils and wrongs of injustice – with: *loving-kindness, loyalty to God, faithfulness to Jesus Christ, and* compassion, that deeply felt love for our fellow human beings, and a share in their suffering.

Lord have mercy. Amen.

⁴ Frederic & Mary Ann Brussat, *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, p. 90.