

“The Blessing of Mercy”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
June 11, 2023 - Second Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 5

[Genesis 12:1-9; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26](#)

Mercy is a very good thing. I didn't, however, always see it this way. When I was a youngster, I grew up in a household with two older brothers, and we would oftentimes play a game called mercy, played by locking hands with your opponent and then twisting their wrists around, trying to cause them enough pain that they cry out, “Mercy!” Being the youngest brother, I suffered a lot of pain during our games of mercy, which I don't recall ever winning. And so, as a kid I thought that mercy was all about pain, and I was not a fan of that!

Now the going away of pain is a common way to understand mercy, for children and adults alike. The word might remind us of a scene from a gladiator movie, during which a gladiator that's been beaten down is about to be vanquished by his foe, who looks to the crowd, which will give him either a thumbs up or a thumbs down to decide if the defeated gladiator will be put out of his misery or if there will there be mercy given. Scholars don't quite know if it was a thumbs down or a thumbs up or something else, but occasionally, the crowd would offer the sign for mercy and the defeated gladiator's life would be spared. Much more often, however, the alternative happened.

And of course, we think about the justice system when we think of mercy, such as people coming before a judge and asking for leniency, for judge to go easy on them and offer them a light sentence or dismiss their case altogether. But in the Bible, mercy means not only the taking away pain or not giving it when it's warranted, deserved, or otherwise called for, but it has a broader meaning, and it's about that broader sense that we'll be looking at now.

In the Bible, mercy means not only offering pardon to somebody, as God lovingly offers to us, and that people are to offer to one another, but is oftentimes means a sense of compassion that moves one to acts of kindness towards someone who is in need. This form of mercy is what God does for us, being moved by compassion to offer kindness to us. Surely, that is in the form of forgiveness, but it's also in the form of all kinds of grace -- many gifts that God gives to us.

And we are taught in our scripture lesson today that this is what God expects us to do as well: To be merciful just as God is merciful. And the kind of mercy we are to show is not just in the form of ceasing to twisting our relatives' or friends' wrists around until they cry out in pain, but to be an active agent of God's grace, to offer kindness, to be moved by compassion, to meet the need of another person.

This is the kind of mercy that God desires for all of us to offer. Jesus demonstrated this himself in our story from the gospel reading. He offered this to insiders and outsiders alike, the lofty and the lowly. He offered it to the lofty leader of the synagogue who came to him seeking for help in his household, and he offered it to the lowly people who were considered to be untouchable, both physically and socially, by helping a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years, helping a dead girl, and helping Matthew the tax collector. These people were lowly, not to be associated with or touched, lest one become unclean. And yet Jesus touched them, healed them, and had fellowship with them, just as they were. This is mercy, meeting the need of people, whatever it is, just as they are now.

This is the kind of mercy that our youngsters just demonstrated for us in telling us about their year-long collection to support Heifer International. Mercy looks like getting a cow for someone on the other side of the planet, knowing that that will bless them and their family in ways beyond our understanding. Mercy was demonstrated by Donna and our teachers, who give to our children each week, teaching them how to be generous and kind. Mercy is shown from of our musicians, who give of their talents and their time to lead us in song, to offer us beautiful moments when we can experience peace. These are all examples of what mercy looks like in our world.

And we, who follow in the tradition of Abram, who was called to go out and be a blessing to all the world's people, are also called to go out and offer a blessing to all by offering mercy.

A beautiful thing about mercy is that it not only blesses people when we offer it here, or on the other side of the planet, or anywhere in between, but it's reciprocal. When you offer the gift of mercy, you are blessed as well. So God's mercy, which is wide, should be offered by you to all people in a wide way. Be

kind and compassionate, offering gifts of all kinds, and truly, God will bless you as you do this. As a church, God will bless us. And as a community, we will become a more blessed place if we can be compassionate and kind. So this day, in all the days before us, let us always seek to offer mercy, to be compassionate and kind however we can, knowing that the world will be blessed and we will be blessed as well. Amen.