

Blessed are the Merciful: Matthew 5:1-12

Over the last several weeks, we have been exploring the beatitudes as one of the ways we cultivate the interior life so that we can more readily find ourselves in the neighbourhood of God's work in Jesus Christ.¹ Today we meet the merciful. Unlike the beatitudes we have looked at thus far, there is no surprise in this one. Mercy is a good thing – it seems rather obvious – of course the merciful are blessed.

We all have a sense of what mercy means. Mercy is about showing compassion regardless of merit, and often in spite of the lack of it. Mercy is about withholding judgment, about granting forgiveness without strings or conditions attached. Mercy is something we cry out for upon the realization of our deepest need. Mercy is what we experience when we are met by the steadfast love of God even in our darkest moments. And mercy is what we extend to others when we choose to honour God-created, God-redeemed humanity in another over judgment or criticism.

Jesus was clearly a man of mercy. Mercy is what Jesus demonstrated when he refused to condemn the woman caught in adultery. Mercy is what Jesus exemplified when he withheld judgment on those who crucified him, and asked the Father to forgive them instead. He touched lepers with his own hands, he had compassion on the poor and downtrodden, he spent the vast majority of his time with the marginalized, he bore their shame as his own. He was merciful in just about everything he did, and he inspired it in others: mercy is what Mary showed when she poured out her perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. Everywhere we look in scripture, showing mercy is the rule, not the exception.

So, if mercy was one of the most evident aspects of Jesus' character and so prominent in his ministry, why is it that those who follow him have such trouble with it? When we think over the course of Christian history, as well as the history of our own lives, perhaps being merciful isn't as obvious as we might like. The Christian religion is responsible for all kinds of judgment, violence, and un-forgiveness. We aren't particularly conspicuous for showing mercy. And if we think we have moved beyond perpetrating violent acts or condemnation, let's think again. Ask our First Nations brothers and sisters about the church's track record with mercy. Ask people why they have left the church and many of them will tell you that they felt judged, unaccepted, and criticized.

Why is it easier to be condemnatory, judgmental, and critical rather than to be merciful – to show compassion, pity, or offer forgiveness? Well, there are a number of reasons, many of them complex. Let's look at two of them.

The first and I think most common reason we are more prone to make judgments rather than show mercy is because it makes us feel better about our own faults and failures. We think we can distract attention away from our own shortcomings if we criticize others.

¹ Much of this series on the beatitudes has been informed by Eugene Peterson, through his lecture series on the Beatitudes (Regent College, 1992).

I have spent a lot of time in the company of others who are quick to make judgments about other people. There was a time when I (ignorantly and arrogantly) believed that judgment and condemnation were the same thing as “critical thinking”. Often my judgments were hidden in sarcasm, which made them no less potent or offensive. Sarcasm doesn’t fool anyone. Other times, condemnation was thinly veiled behind intellectual observations about the shortcomings of others – I have started calling these kinds of observations *snoobservations*. What others saw and heard was arrogance and moral superiority, instead of experiencing a moment of grace, a moment in which they knew that God’s love was present. What my criticism and judgment really revealed was a profound failure to comprehend the mercy of God. It was evidence that I knew very little of God’s grace, and was therefore unable to extend it to others.

Judgment and criticism can happen in the most insignificant of things. Making a derogatory comment about what the person walking down the street is wearing and how it might reflect some kind of moral failure, belittling someone for an apparent lack of manners. It happens in the way we find fault with people who do things differently than we would do them, or when we default to criticism before we can say something good about someone. It happens when we blow the horn at the person who cuts us off on the road, calling them an idiot or some other more colourful insult. It happens when we think that others don’t deserve our compassion because they are responsible for their own situation - they have to live with the consequences of their poor choices. When our response to others is one of judgment, criticism, or condemnation, the only thing we actually do is expose our own ignorance of others and their situation in life, and our ignorance of God, and what God has done for us in and through Jesus Christ. Have we really experienced so little of God’s mercy that we are so stingy with our own?

Another reason why we might default to judgment rather than to mercy is that sometimes we have a genuine zeal for God’s kingdom and his ways, but we are impatient with God’s timing. So we try to speed up the process by casting our own judgments and demanding that others shape up. We think we can criticize them or guilt them into behaving, and we overlook the necessity of the Spirit to effect change in others. Has anyone ever been judged or guilted into real change?

Ideology plays a critical role in feeding our zeal, but it also threatens our ability to be merciful. If something doesn’t fit into the structures of what we believe is right and wrong, we judge and condemn – we lack mercy. Christians are particularly susceptible to this because we do hold certain things as true and others as false, certain things as good and other things as bad, certain things as right and certain things as wrong. We do draw lines around what we believe because we are rightly concerned with doctrine and truth.

And, when it comes to zeal for God’s ways, there are exceptions to the general biblical stance on mercy. The primary exception is Jesus’ anger and judgment on the Pharisees, evidenced in his great “woes” – Woe to you scribes and Pharisees – hypocrites! Seven times ‘woe’ (Matt 23). Jesus is fed up with them, and he doesn’t hold anything back in exposing them and their hypocrisy. This is entirely in keeping with the Old Testament

prophetic tradition of judgment. Amos, Hosea, and Micah are masters of the angry, prophetic tirade. Their anger is larger than life and they rage over injustice and hypocrisy.

We might look to these examples and think we are entirely justified in our own judgment and condemnation (the Crusaders certainly thought they were, the Church did with its residential schools). And sometimes we are justified. But this is a rare exception to the rule of mercy. We should keep in mind that most of the incidents we find in scripture are directed toward people who claim to be religious and religious leaders – against people who use their own religiousness as a cover for their own greed, lust, and gluttony. We ought to be very, very careful indeed if we are going to go the route of such condemnation, and it always and everywhere must be kept within the larger world of mercy.

There is nothing wrong with creating standards of doctrine and truth – this is essential if our faith is going to mean anything. But perhaps we might remember that God is always bigger than our understanding of him. And even the understanding that we do have will always be skewed by the Fall, and we need the power of the Spirit to keep us humble, especially when we begin to hold too tightly with clenched fists. There is nothing a clenched fist can do but hit and pound. Clenched fists are unable to extend mercy and love, let alone *receive* mercy and love. Perhaps we might remember that *while we were still sinners, Christ died for us – pouring out the love of the Father on us, granting us freedom from deserved judgment and condemnation, so that we could know the depth and breadth and width and height of his love.* At its core, mercy expresses itself in forgiveness. Being merciful is about providing access to the forgiveness of God in Christ. Perhaps we might drill some holes in those hard lines we draw, so that mercy can get through – in both directions.

If we are going to have anything to do with mercy (and we must if we are going to call ourselves followers of Jesus), we are going to have to allow ourselves to participate in the transforming work of the Spirit. This is the work of sanctification, of making us holy. Cultivating this inner life to be more attentive to the work of God in Christ (spirituality), and being transformed more and more into his image (holiness) go hand in hand. These beatitudes help us do that – they help us see what that inner life of holiness and blessing looks like. And mercy looks like compassion and forgiveness.

In his reflections on the beatitudes, Eugene Peterson encourages us to think of those incidents, experiences, and examples in our own lives that bear witness to the mercy of God, and the blessing of the merciful in our own lives. He calls these ‘monuments of mercy’. When I think of my own monuments of mercy, I think of my marriage. Perhaps our deepest relationships require the most mercy because we are confronted every day with the fallenness of another human being. When I am a bear to live with, Randy forgives. When I fail to meet his expectations (which I’m sure happens with disturbing frequency), he still loves me. In marriage, mercy is reciprocal – we bear one another’s sins with each other– we are merciful and we receive mercy from one another. This isn’t always the case, but I think we get it right more often than not. Which is good, because a

D. BENSON
JULY 5TH, 2015

marriage can't survive without mercy. There are a lot of reasons why marriages fail, but I wonder if a failure of mercy is at the root of most of them. Randy and our marriage is one of my monuments of mercy.

The only thing being merciful costs us is the admission that it's more important to love than it is to be right. Without mercy, we live within earshot of Jesus, but never find ourselves in his embrace. Without mercy, we live within sight of Jesus' work of forgiving and loving and making things right, but never get in on the action. Over and over again God loves us, forgives us – mercy's us into a better life – this is the way of Jesus, the way of the cross, the way of blessing (Eugene Peterson). Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.