

We come to our fifth Beatitude today, one that seems on the surface to be easily understood. It makes sense as we have heard it said that we reap what we sow or we get what we give. Yet, before we dive into this first Beatitude let's remind ourselves of the first four:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled...

Listen to how F.W. Boreham reminds us that these Beatitudes build one upon another: "[Only] the heart [that] has been reduced to a beautiful poverty of spirit; [only] the heart that has mourned in lowliest contrition; [only] the heart that has learned the subtle secret of meekness; [only] the heart that has hungered and thirsted after righteousness... is alone qualified to exhibit mercy in its tenderest and most effective forms."

We are able to be merciful, says Boreham, as we live the Beatitudes.

So, listen now to our fifth Beatitude from a number of different translations...

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."

"You're blessed when you care.

At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for."

"Great blessings belong to those who show mercy to others.

Mercy will be given to them.

"Happy are those who are merciful to others;

God will be merciful to them!"

"Happy are the kind and merciful, for they shall be shown mercy."

Let us pray... Holy One, help us to hear afresh what it means to be people of mercy. Help us to see the blessings of being kind and merciful rather than harboring resentment or exacting revenge. Open our ears, open our hearts to the mercies we receive every morning from you, O God, so that we will be able to extend mercy to others. Amen.

With a show of hands... let me know who has traveled to Israel? Do you remember Jerusalem, the Old City? I remember wandering the cobbled streets of the Old City and making my way to the Western Wall, the place of sacred prayer near the Temple Mount. The Wall is a remnant of the retaining wall surrounding the second temple built by King Herod in 516 BC.

This ancient Temple was the center of Jerusalem and in the heart of the great Temple there was a small curtained room, considered the site of awesome power, known as the holy of holies. The Hebrews believed God's actual presence abided in this sacred space.

Within the curtained room stood the Ark of the Covenant, a rectangular box containing the scrolls of God's divine law. On top of the Ark lay a slab of gold, called the mercy seat. At each end of the mercy seat knelt two carved angels, cherubim (the angels closest to God), facing each other with wings out spread.

We read in Exodus, "There I will meet you..." God promised his people. (Ex 25:22) And so, once a year, the High Priest met God in the holy of holies, seeking God's forgiveness and mercy for the Hebrew people. Flora Slosson Wuellner writes, "The Hebrews believed this mercy and forgiveness radiated with power from the heart of the Temple outward to the hearts and lives of all the people of God."

Imagine a place today that was set aside, as the one place where God's awesome presence abided. Yet, this one place was only available to a religious representative, maybe in our Presbyterian family, one of the General Assembly Co-Moderators once each year, on behalf of the people of God? Only once a year would God's mercies radiate outward to us, God's people. Only... once a year...

Oh, I am so thankful that we have the words from the writer of Lamentations that remind us that God's mercies are new every morning. God's mercy doesn't only radiate outward to us once a year, but every single morning of every single day! This morning... you and I received new mercies from God... for those things we should not have done, said or thought, but did anyways and for those things we left undone, that needed to be done or said. Thanks, be to God for God's mercies!

Yes, we are recipients of God's mercy, of kindness in excess of what we deserve, yet are we dispensers of the mercy?

For, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" said Apostle Paul to the early Christian Church. He continued saying, "God's temple is holy, and *you are that temple.*" Apostle is saying that you and I are to be like the "holies of holies," God's abiding presence in the world, radiating mercy to others! Hold that thought for just a moment... with our very lives we are to be God's abiding presence in the world!

Yet, you and I have been schooled in a way that makes it more natural for us to exact from others what we believe they deserve, especially if they have offended or harmed us in any way! Just listen to your gut, as I share some examples...

A friend owes you money, but just drove by in a new car. A boss hired you with promises of a promotion, but it never materialized. Your circle of friends escaped for a weekend getaway, but you were not on the invite list. Your adult children have time for everyone else, but not for you. Or here in the church, you were sick but no one came to visit you. You clocked numerous volunteer hours, but nobody noticed. For the children and youth among us today, what about a friend who promised to invite you to her birthday party, but then left you off the invitation list. Will you invite her to yours? What about your parents, who forgot about the promised reward for your top grade? Disappointments, hurts or old wounds have a way of lying just below the surface of our lives, coloring our world in such a way that mercy is not part of our palate.

When we are hurt by others, we have to ask ourselves do we get over it or do we get even? Do we put the fire out or stoke the fire with our anger and resentment? Do we let our hurts heal or do we let them turn into a grudge or worse yet into hatred?

We are the recipients of God's mercy, of kindness in excess of what we deserve, yet do our lives radiate mercy? Apostle Paul reminded us that "God's temple is holy, and *each of us are that temple.*" We are to be God's abiding presence... God's radiating mercy into the world.

Let me tell you a story about two brothers, as told by Max Lucado in his book *The Applause from Heaven*: Daniel was living in the southern city of Porto Alegre. He

worked at a gym and dreamed of owning his own gym. The bank agreed to finance the purchase, if he could get someone to cosign the note. His brother agreed.

They filled out all the applications and awaited the approval. Everything went smoothly, and Daniel soon received a call from the bank telling him he could come and pick up the check. As soon as he got off work, he went to the bank.

When the loan officer saw Daniel, he looked surprised and asked Daniel why he had come. "To pick up the check," Daniel explained. "That's funny," responded the banker. "Your brother was in here earlier. He already picked up the money."

Daniel was incensed. He never dreamed his own brother would trick him like that. He stormed over to his brother's house and pounded on the door. The brother answered the door with his daughter in his arms. He knew Daniel wouldn't hit him if he was holding a child. He was right, Daniel didn't hit him. But Daniel promised his brother that if he ever saw him again he would break his neck, for his brother used the money for his own purposes.

Daniel went home. His big heart was bruised and ravaged by the trickery of his brother. He had no other choice but to go back to the gym and work to pay off his debt.

A few months later, Daniel met a young missionary and through him Daniel and his wife learned of Jesus and of God's abundant mercy. Yet, though Daniel had been forgiven much by God's mercy, he still found it impossible to forgive his brother. The wound was too deep and revenge still simmered.

Yet, one day, two years later, Daniel spotted his brother on the street. Here are Daniel's own words about that encounter: "I saw him, but he didn't see me. I felt my fists clench and my face get hot. My initial impulse was to grab him around the throat and choke the life out of him. But, as I looked into his face, my anger began to melt; for as I saw him, I saw the image of our father. I saw our father's eyes. I saw our father's look. I saw our father's expression. And I saw our father in his face, and when I did my enemy, became my brother."

Daniel walked towards his brother and his brother seeing him turned to run. But, Daniel reached out and grabbed his shoulder. His brother winced, expecting a blow to be landed. But rather than squeezing the life out of him, Daniel hugged him and the two men stood in the middle of the river of people and wept.

Daniel saw the face of his father... What if we were to see the face of our Divine Parent in each other? What if we were to see the Christ in each other, for are we not all created in the image of God? What if we could see the image of God in those who have wronged us in some way, in those who deserve our punishment rather than mercy?

"Mercy," writes Maxine Dunnam, "requires intention, deliberate effort – an act of will." As Mary Lou Redding reminds us, "We have to learn mercy - and not everyone does."

We know that to be true from a biblical story, where a man was forgiven a large debt, yet once forgiven he immediately held a fellow slave accountable for a small debt owed him. The man was forgiven much, yet he did not extend mercy to his fellow slave. He had not learned mercy, grace that acts, even though he had received mercy.

What about you? What about us? Are we willing to be schooled in mercy, in the giving of grace that acts? Are we willing to be temples of God radiating mercy to others?

What if we practiced grace that acts in small ways first, in the everyday places of our lives like letting someone move ahead of you in the grocery store or banking line or letting someone into a line of traffic even though they've been driving on the shoulder of the road? What if we practiced small acts of grace in the life of this church forgiving a misspoken word that offended us or used soft words for someone disrespecting rules – think young skate boarders. What if we practiced small acts of grace in the workplace allowing one more chance for an employee who shows up late to work or granting grace to a colleague that grabbed your idea and took credit for it? What if we practiced small acts of grace in our homes by taking lunch to your child, even though earlier in the day you had reminded her repeatedly not to forget? What if you children showed understanding when your parent is not able to play with you right now?

We can practice small ways, but we can also dare great acts, like Daniel's decision to forgive his brother, or maybe your own willingness to forgive someone who has betrayed you or hurt you deeply. You see, mercy demands our intention, because in our daily interactions with others we have the power to criticize or condemn, as well as dismiss or cut off.

Mercy demands our intention, our deliberate act of will, to reconcile and make whole our relationships with others by God's mercy to us. Yet, having received mercy from God, will we be like the holy of holies and radiate mercy into this world? I pray so. Amen.