

“Mercy”

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: John 8: 2-11 and Matthew 23:23

“Mercy—unmerited, inadvisably offered, and brimming with foolish hope—is the making of a Christ-follower,” writes Rev. Lizzie McManus-Dail in her commentary on the passage from John 8:2-11. She continues, “It’s not that I think practicing mercy is particularly easy.” No, dear friend, it is not. For most of us, mercy is counter to our nature. Culturally, mercy is the last thing that seems to be offered to people who are struggling, who’ve made mistakes, or who are hard to deal with. In fact, I think it’s even hard to practice mercy toward ourselves. We live in a world that many people believe is some type of meritocracy, even though we know that it isn’t always merit that gets us what we want and need. In the story from John’s Gospel, it seems to be the case that mercy is the last thing that people in Jesus’ day wanted to offer someone who was caught being “unfaithful to her husband.” Of course, no one took the time to consider how unfaithful she was, but more importantly, with whom. There’s no man being dragged into the street. There is no man who is facing possible stoning. On reading the law, I don’t think it delineates that only the woman is at fault in the case of unfaithfulness. Nevertheless, here we are with this woman being dragged down the street to face judgment. Righteous judgment. Meanwhile, the other goal was to trap Jesus.

The *First Nations Version* of the New Testament tells this story more vividly than our contemporary English Bible. First, our scripture sets the stage in verse two when Jesus had

gathered at “the sacred lodge” --also known as the Temple—to teach. Then, “across the plaza a crowd of dust was rising from a group of people who were walking toward Creator Sets Free (Jesus) as he was teaching. They were forcefully dragging a woman along with them. He could see her tears and the look on her face.” Then, the scroll keepers and the Separated Ones (Pharisees) brought the woman to Creator Sets Free (Jesus) and forced her down on the ground in front of Jesus and all the people.

Consider all the characters here. There is Jesus, the crowd that had gathered around him to hear him teach, the Scribes and Pharisees, the group who dragged the woman, and the woman herself. One could do a whole sermon series on each of the characters here. I want to briefly share with you my interpretation of the characters:

- 1) The Scribes and Pharisees had only one goal: trap Jesus and expose him for the charlatan they thought he was. They wanted him to be publicly seen breaking the law (or endorsing the law being broken), or they wanted him to be seen as violating the Torah because of the lack of witnesses and so an incomplete legal process if Jesus ordered the stoning. Either way, they thought they had him.
- 2) The crowd being taught. This is not what they signed up for. They planned on Jesus teaching on other topics. We don’t know what, but I’m quite sure they didn’t plan on teaching about adultery.
- 3) Jesus. He always knew that someone was out to get him. Religious leaders constantly tried to find ways to trap him and they could be anywhere, anytime. Just be careful here not to assume that only Judaism has that problem. Modern Christians often spend a lot of time trying to trip up, discredit, or otherwise hurt their opponents. Maybe not as severely as the Romans and the religious leaders of Jesus’ time, but sometimes I wonder...
- 4) The woman. There doesn’t seem to be any question that she was in the wrong. Then again, like I mentioned, here she is on trial and facing stoning, but where is the man who was involved? Is her husband bringing the charges? No. What really happened here and why is she suddenly in serious trouble? Did she have a reputation? Was she caught in “the act”? What is going through her mind? Did she even follow Jesus or know who he was? He certainly wasn’t from the Temple itself, so why was he the authority here? Did she even see a way out? More about her after we talk about what happened.

- 5) Jesus. Teaching on the Temple grounds. Reminding people of God's love, mercy, and justice. He sees the crowd coming. Now what? With no time to prepare, Jesus is again confronted by "the authorities." He sees the woman's eyes, and the tears and the confusion. I wonder if he already decided what would happen before he even heard from her accusers.

In her book, *Jesus for Everyone*, Amy-Jill Levine points out that the Greek word for "test" (*peirazo*) in John 8:6 is the same word used in the Lord's prayer ("Lead us not into temptation) and when Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness. She continues, "The story itself is not technically about forgiveness. It is about a legal procedure." Maybe that is why Jesus took a few minutes and drew in the sand? We don't know. What we do know is this: Jesus thwarts the trap of the religious leaders, cleverly transforming a lose-lose situation into one that centers the humanity of a woman caught in between. "While the scribes and Pharisees appear to be focused on legalism, Jesus is focused on transformation—for the woman caught in adultery but also for every person present at the spectacle. (writers of Sanctified Art)"

Jesus does honor the law. Make no mistake. He came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. He told us that blatantly in Matthew 5:17. At the same time, he taught those who would listen over and over again that mercy, justice, and faithfulness should be at the heart of every rule. And in the case of this woman, knowing all that he did about the case, mercy was the right option.

Mercy. I told you earlier that it is the making of a Christ-follower. That's true, but it doesn't make it easy. In fact, Rev. McManus-Dail tells us, "I doubt Jesus would talk so much about forgiveness and mercy if it were easy—God tends to repeat what we struggle to listen to. No, mercy is brutal." She continues, "Mercy is what we ask for when we have messed

up mightily in our relationships, our marriages, our parenting, our friendships, that we face either the death of that relationship or the death of who we through we were.” Don’t miss that point. The woman in this story is not the only one then or now that needs mercy. We do as well. More than we’d like to admit. When was the last time you sought mercy? Did you receive it? When was mercy last sought from you? Did you offer it?

“Mercy makes no sense. It is not logical, or equally beneficial. Mercy does not make us money or make us look good (McManus-Dail).” No wonder we struggle to give it out. We operate out of logic... Or we calculate what we might get out of doing things a certain way. Conversely, we know that if we offer mercy to someone that someone else is going to come along and chastise us for our “foolhardy” ways. Mercy is hard, and for the one who gives it, there may not be an obvious upside. “But” Rev. McManus-Dail reminds us, “Mercy is what makes us God’s own.”

I’m talking today on Wall Street, or in the public square, or even at a local city Council meeting. Today, I’m presenting before God’s people. We are people who are called to be different from the rest. Not better, just different. Merciful. Remember when he told us, “Blessed are the merciful”? It sounds nice, but you’ll never see it in a courtroom or posted in a school. Instead, you’ll be reminded of the law and the commandments. Even people who reject the Old Testament know those ten commandments. Too bad they don’t read the rest of the Old Testament. Further, it’s too bad they (or we?) can’t or won’t comprehend Jesus’ call to mercy, forgiveness, and justice. It seems too soft. It seems too permissive. It seems wrong. “But mercy is what makes us God’s own.”

Many people today wonder if God is still at work in the world. Given world events and the vitriol around us (and perhaps within us), it is right to question. Where is God in all of this? It seems like the “bad” people win all the time. It seems as though the soft are stomped on, stepped over, and left for dead. Maybe we feel a lot in common with that woman. We just wish there were more mercy in the world.

And yet, when the shoe is on the other foot, and we are members of the group dragging someone before the judgment seat, mercy is far from our minds. It’s too risky to seem less than in control. To seem less than powerful. To seem less than able to fix things and make the world in our image. Society rewards such power and domination. It doesn’t matter your political stripe, or your economic background, or, sadly, your church affiliation. Mercy is not popular. Lest forget it wasn’t popular in Jesus’ day, either. And yet, “Mercy is a practice of hoping and knowing that there is more than the thing that hurts us—more than the thing that haunts us.” Rev. Lizzie McManus-Dail goes even further, “The receiving and giving of mercy in the most awful and improbable places is what makes me know that God is still at work in this world.” Mercy may be one way we show the world that we are Christians by our love.

“...Mercy is part of God’s justice, for God’s justice is God’s joy. God’s justice does not align with our human metrics of justice and punishment. God’s justice is the delight God feels at the lost sheep coming home, the coin being found. God’s justice is not retributive. God’s goodness is rooted in goodness propagating in the face of death.”

“The crowd was silent and waited to see what [Jesus] would say, but he said nothing (*First Nations Version of the New Testament*)” As the story tells us, [Jesus] bent over and with his finger wrote something in the dirt. When he did not answer right away, the Pharisees became angry and kept questioning him.” And you thought it was before Pilate that Jesus first was silent. Pay attention here.

After writing in the dirt for a bit and feeling their ire, Jesus then looked up at them and said, ‘The one who has done no wrong should be the first to throw a stone at her.’ He bent over again and began writing in the dirt with his finger.

When they heard his words, they all stood there silently. Then, beginning with the elders, one at a time they dropped their stones and walked away. Soon all were gone except for Creator Sets Free and the woman. He stood and looked at her. ‘Honored woman,’ he said, ‘where are the ones who were accusing you?’ The woman looked up timidly into his eyes and said, ‘No one, wisdom keeper.’ Then he says to her, “Go forth. Sin no more. And live.”

I truly believe that those words were meant for everyone in that crowd: Pharisees, crowd members, learners, the woman, and ultimately us. Mercy is shown to us daily by the one the First Nations people call, “Creator sets free.” In his name, I offer to you mercy for your own sins and invite you—to the best of your ability—to go forth, sin no more, and live.”

Mercy! Amen.