



## Love Mercy

**Matthew 25:31:46**

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Washington Street UMC

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Good morning church. I'm curious, what has the Lord done to you? How has the Lord failed you? Surely, God has been faithful to us; God has gifted us with new life through Christ; God has sustained us with the presence of the Holy Spirit. God has been true to the covenant. And what does God desire in return? What does the Creator desire from us, the created?

"He has told you what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

These words of Micah continue to ring true for God's people today, just as they did when they were first spoken some 2700 years ago. For a people of faith, who seem to have lost their way in the midst of a tumultuous national identity crisis, Micah redirects our focus. God has laid out a path for faithful living, and Micah is drawing our attention to God's desire for us, God's created.

In September, we looked at how to define Biblical justice – as the low being made high, and the high being made low; and we talked about what it means to *do* justice, to be involved in God's work of justice in the world.

Last week, we talked about the Biblical definition of mercy, coming from the Hebrew word *hesed*. And today, we turn to what it means to *love* such mercy. How do we *love* when a person of power shows compassion, forbearance, and empathy on those whom they hold power over? What does that mean for me, as I seek to be a faithful disciple of Christ, who is God's mercy incarnate?

Throughout the history of drama and cinema, the motif of mercy has been a common thread in some of the most beloved scripts to have made it into production. For example, in one of the most well-known plays of all time, *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean is transformed by the mercy offered him by Bishop Myriel. Though the Bishop had more than one opportunity to turn him in to the police, and to let the inspector Javert (Jah-vair) whisk him away to prison, the Bishop displays the value of mercy, which becomes a formidable force in changing Valjean's life.

Mercy is on display in some of the Disney greats – though, Disney tends to rely on poetic revenge, rather than mercy. There's Aladdin, who spares the life of Jafar, having refused his opportunity to take Jafar's life. In Cinderella, though treated with malice by her sisters, Cinderella extends mercy toward her sisters even after she is identified as the love of the Prince. And in Frozen, Elsa and Anna decide to let it go, when they send Hans, the conniving and power hungry prince, back to live with his brothers.

Jim McDermott, a screenwriter in LA, identifies the mercy that is displayed in Star Wars, offering, “What I love about ‘Star Wars’ is how it insists that real mercy is an act of radical defiance. It is a choice that goes against the grain, that doesn’t make a lot of sense, can even appear gratuitous or downright dangerous. And at the same time, mercy is the path by which the hero becomes his fullest self. In the case of Luke, what finally makes him a Jedi Knight is not the battles he wins, but the fact that instead of pursuing his cause he chooses to try and save Vader from himself.”<sup>i</sup>

It is compelling when we see mercy on display. It is captivating, and engaging, and such a display has a way of giving us the feels when we see someone in a position of power offer empathy, or compassion, or forgiveness. It is the Scrooge effect. It may take us by surprise, but that surprise is what makes the display all the more powerful.

But seeing mercy, witnessing mercy on display and appreciating it, having a ‘love’ of witnessing mercy offered by others is not what Micah means when he instructs us to ‘love mercy.’ Being a welcome recipient of someone else’s mercy is not sufficient for Micah, not even as personal recipients of God’s mercy displayed through Jesus Christ.

In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, Micah’s word *love* is translated using the Greek word *agape*. *Agape* is the Greek word used to define the love of God. It is not a *passive* love, it is an *active* love. *Agape* is the love spoken of in John 3:16, “for God so *loved* the world that he gave his only Son.” *Agape* is the love spoken of in 1 Corinthians 13 – it is love personified in the person of Jesus Christ. This love is patient, kind, it does not envy or boast, it is not proud. This love, *agape* love, is not a feeling or emotion, it is a way of living.

When Micah is instructing us to ‘love mercy,’ he is not asking us to have a passive feeling that favors mercy. Micah is not telling us to watch from afar as innocent bystanders who appreciate the mercy that is offered to and by others. Micah isn’t even inviting us to simply be grateful for the mercy God has shown us. The threefold instruction of Micah is active in nature. To *do* justice, to *love* mercy, and to *walk* humbly with God is not a simple invitation to sit back and reflect on how great is God, but to respond to how great God is through engaging as active participants in God’s work in the world. We are invited to love, as God is love, to *agape* mercy – to be actively participating in mercy, just as God actively participates in mercy, witnessed most fully in the life, teaching, and sacrificial faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

This invitation is well defined in our scriptural text for today, coming in Matthew 25.

This text is apocalyptic in nature, describing the end times. It’s a Revelation text, set in the midst of the gospel. Jesus, gathered privately with the disciples, sets the scene for a time to come. “When the Son of Man comes in his glory,” he begins, “and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people, one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left.”

I've never been a sheep herder, so I had to look this up. At the end of the day, before night falls, the goats have to be brought into the barn. They do not have the physical capacity to withstand the cold of the evening air. So the goats are separated that they might be brought inside, while the sheep are left to pasture.

Having separated the two groups, Jesus then talks about the difference between the sheep and the goats. The sheep are called blessed. Jesus says, "when I was hungry, you gave me food; when I was thirsty, drink; when I was sick, you took care of me." And these sheep, now called the righteous, asked in response, quite surprised at Jesus's remarks, "What? When did we see you hungry, thirsty, or sick?"

In an interesting twist, if we skip forward just a bit in the text, the goats ask the same question as the sheep. Jesus says to the goats, "When I was hungry, you did not feed me; when I was thirsty, you did not give me drink; when I was sick, you did not take care of me." The goats, now called the accursed, responded the same as the sheep had previously, "What? When did we see you hungry, thirsty, or sick?"

Jesus's response to the goats mirrors his response to the sheep. To the sheep, Jesus offers, "what you *did* for the least of these who are members of my family, you *did* for me." To the goats, Jesus offers, "what you did *not* do for the least of these, you did *not* do for me."

This is an interesting twist, because the sheep and the goats had the same observation – neither saw Jesus in the presence of the hungry, the thirsty, or the sick. Both groups asked the same question, indicative of a shared assessment. "When did we see you in the least of these, Lord?"

And yet, though their response was the same, indicative of a shared failure to see Christ in the 'other,' the groups speak from two different perspectives. Professor and pastor Richard Swanson offers that the sheep seemed surprised they were supposed to be looking for the face of Jesus in the other. "The first group never looked for anything of the sort; in fact, they find the whole suggestion that they should have spent their time looking for the face of Jesus to be a waste of time. They fed people because they were hungry, not because they were deserving."<sup>ii</sup> Perhaps we should add a spoken emphasis to their response to Jesus, a sentiment of, were we supposed to be looking: "What? When did we see your face in the other?"

On the other hand, the second group seemed surprised, because, while looking for it, they missed the face of Jesus in the other. One could argue on behalf of the second group, saying they looked everywhere for the face of Jesus. And yet, they failed to see Jesus in the hungry, the thirsty, and the sick. Though they may have found some deserving of their care, in trying to decide *who* was worthy of their care, they missed a great deal. Perhaps we should add a spoken emphasis to their response to Jesus, a sentiment of, you were never there - "What? When did we see your face in the other?"

The invitation of the Biblical text isn't to walk through life trying to decide what we must do, or who we must do it to, so that we might receive the affirmation of God's mercy. God did not do an assessment of who might receive the mercy of God through Jesus Christ before deciding to call Christ to the cross. God's mercy, witnessed in the person of Jesus Christ, was extended to all, regardless of their

faithfulness – in spite of their faithfulness – perhaps, it could be said, because of their unfaithfulness. The agape of God, the active love of God in Jesus Christ, participated in giving up power ... or perhaps, better stated, in shifting power from exclusion and retribution, to invitation and reconciliation.

As Paul says in Colossians 3, “As the Lord has forgiven you (as the Lord has shown you mercy) so too must you also forgive (must you also show mercy).”

So, tangibly, what does this love of mercy look like? How do we, as 21<sup>st</sup> Century disciples of Christ, show mercy as a an affirmation of the mercy we have been shown? How do we give up prosecutorial power, as God has given up such condemnable capacity? How do we, in response to God’s shift in power, also shift our power from exclusion and retribution, to invitation and reconciliation?

First, it must be stated, that *every* person has the capacity to show mercy. No matter how wealthy, or poor – no matter how much power, or how little power – no matter how much privilege, or lack of privilege – we are all capable of showing mercy to others. No person can claim to be exempt from God’s call to love mercy in tangible ways. Though, it also should be stated, that with power, privilege, and wealth comes a greater expectation. To those who have been given much, much will be expected.

Mercy, as we talked about last week, is Biblically defined by there being a power differential present. Mercy is the willingness of the one who *has* power to *withhold* such power, or to *shift* such power, for the purpose of God’s greater justice: so that all of humanity, all of God’s created, might share equally in community with one another.

So mercy might be a small act. To love mercy might be to simply hold the door for the person carrying the infant, or the grocery bags behind you. In that moment, you may have a capacity they do not – you may have the use of two arms, while they may not. It is a relatively inconsequential power, and yet, should you not show mercy and have the door shut on them, the weight of your power might cause them harm – physically or emotionally.

Mercy might be to forgive a debt to someone who owes you money. It could be a bank forgiving student loans, or excusing a late payment and not charging late fees. Wealth, gross wealth inequality, often invites a love of mercy that is missing in our national identity. It is merciful for the one who runs the company, the CEO, CFO, or COO to extend mercy to those whom they have power over in the company.

At minimum, to love mercy requires acknowledging the power disparities and privileges that exist in our society. Mercy is being willing to acknowledge that there is inherent power and privilege that comes from one’s wealth, one’s address, one’s school diploma, one’s skin color, one’s sexual orientation, or one’s gender identity. To love mercy, we first must identify how our intersection in these criteria gives us power – how our existence as an individual in society gives us inherent power. And then, to love mercy might look like speaking up for a person whose voice is not being heard – for someone who has less power, or less privilege. To love mercy, to be active in exemplifying mercy, is to use your power, shifting your power, from building up your own voice, to centering the voice of the

one not being heard. From shifting your own wealth, to build up the wealth of the poor. It's shifting your own concern, from your self-isolated well-being, to the well-being of God's created whole.

Because ultimately, if our love of mercy is to follow in Micah's guidance, it should look something – even if but a glimpse – like God's mercy in Jesus Christ. To give up power is sacrificial. To give up one's right to condemn is divine. To offer up of one's privilege for the well-being of the other is reparative. To extend mercy to one who may not *deserve* mercy is reconciliatory.

This call to love mercy is to be actively involved in extending mercy, to love as God loves in seeking the shalom, the peace and well-being, of the created humanity. This call to love mercy is to see the other as worthy of God's mercy, just as God saw humanity – you and me – as worthy of such mercy. And when we are gathered, as the sheep and the goats, being sorted out with all the nations before Christ, can you hear the question Christ will ask? Did you see my face in the other? Did you extend the mercy I showed you to the other?

To close, I want to offer a prayer by Pope Francis, in this year for the Jubilee of Mercy.

Lord Jesus Christ, you have taught us to be merciful like the heavenly Father, and have told us that whoever sees you sees Him. Show us your face and we will be saved. Your loving gaze freed Zacchaeus and Matthew from being enslaved by money; the adulteress and Magdalene from seeking happiness only in created things; made Peter weep after his betrayal, and assured Paradise to the repentant thief.

Let us hear, as if addressed to each one of us, the words that you spoke to the Samaritan woman: "If you knew the gift of God!"

You are the visible face of the invisible Father, of the God who manifests his power above all by forgiveness and mercy: let the Church be your visible face in the world, its Lord risen and glorified. You willed that your ministers would also be clothed in weakness in order that they may feel compassion for those in ignorance and error: let everyone who approaches them feel sought after, loved, and forgiven by God.

Send your Spirit and consecrate every one of us with its anointing, so that the Jubilee of Mercy may be a year of grace from the Lord, and your Church, with renewed enthusiasm, may bring good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives and the oppressed, and restore sight to the blind.

We ask this of you, Lord Jesus, through the intercession of Mary, Mother of Mercy; you who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Jim McDermott. *A Force to Be Reckoned With: Mercy, sin and 'Star Wars'*. Americamagazine.org. November 19, 2015.

<sup>ii</sup> Richard Swanson. *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew: A Storyteller's Commentary, Year A*. Pilgrim Press, 2007.