

THE WIDENESS IN GOD'S MERCY

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University Congregational Church

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Reading: Matthew 5: 7 (KJV)

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”

Growing up in the South I heard the story of a black man who had been accused of a grievous crime. He was dragged before a judge and an all white jury. The judge asked the man, “Are you ready to plead your case before the bar of justice?” The Negro replied, “No, Sir. What this black man needs is not the white man’s justice. This black man needs the white man’s mercy.”

The story reveals more than the question of racism in the judicial system. The defendant hopes that mercy will be employed to defend his case regardless of the evidence that may or may not be held against him. He is hoping that the power of rhetoric will move the hearts of jurors to either find him innocent or spare him the gallows. Even today we hear people who plead their cause at the feet of mercy or place their lives on the mercy of the courts. We presume that mercy is most related to trial and judgment. And we presume that mercy is primarily an emotion. These two assumptions are as ancient as the Greek philosophers but do not reflect the deep meaning of mercy in the Christian tradition.

The Greeks associated mercy, *eleos*, with *pathos*, emotion or feeling. Pathos, of course, is the root of our word pathology. When we use pathology to refer to mental health it means an illness or a sickness. Eleos was thought to be an emotion that was easily corrupted and not to be trusted. The Stoics understood eleos in the light of pathos. Eleos was unworthy of a wise person. They did not think of mercy as

a characteristic of moral relationships. Emotions like *eleos* could undermine or distort reason. It lies outside the realm of evidence and consequences. Mercy could, in a court of law, create partiality in judgment. In their minds this would not be justice. The rhetoric of mercy could trump the evidence of case law and the prescribed remedies of restitution or punishment.

This kind of thinking finds its way into theology. Many people continue to believe that we require God's mercy if we are to survive God's judgment. All of the evidence of our sinfulness is recorded in the Lamb's Book of Life and we are all judged guilty. We will only be spared the fires of hell if God's mercy grants us a stay of execution. It reminds me about the story of the priest who was preparing a dying man for his voyage into the great beyond. Whispering firmly, the priest said, "Denounce the devil! Let him know how little you think of his evil!"

The dying man said nothing.

The priest repeated his order. Still the dying man said nothing. The priest asked, "Why do you refuse to denounce the devil and his evil?"

The dying man said, "Until I know where I'm heading, I don't think I ought to antagonize anybody."¹

¹ Jokes About Hell, www.jokesabouthell.com/devil_jokes_thirteen.html, downloaded 7/9/10.

Without a doubt, there is a relationship in Jewish and Christian theology between eschatology and God's mercy. The final destiny of human beings and the mercy of God have long been thought and written about.

If we mean that the "end" of human beings is about judgment and punishment at the closing of history then I think we have it wrong. In Hebrew theology mercy has always been a relational return. We do not wait for the end of time hoping for the mercy of God. Mercy happens in relationships. Present tense! In the Hebrew Bible the community of faith is forged on the covenant of God. There is now, in this life and in these times, a promise of mutuality and community. Mercy is the kind of thing you expect in your family or congregation. An Israelite would never presume to command the mercy of God, but because God has made a promise to Israel, every Jew within the covenant could rely on God's mercy. Mercy, God's and ours, is the currency of community.

This suggests to us that the relationship between the human and sacred is that of original oneness. There is cohesion between God and human, like there is between parents and their children. Mutuality and interdependence are the benchmarks of what our relationship with God and others is supposed to be like. That is how we are meant to be together.

And what is the mercy of God that the faithful trust in? It is clearly an attitude, a predisposition toward the wellbeing of the other. In Hebrew *eleos* is not just an emotion but also an expression of love. In other words, mercy is more than emotion. Mercy is the action we take to make, keep, and restore the wholeness of persons.

Mercy is not just a noun. It is a verb. Mercy is gracious action and therefore always demonstrable. We read in the book of Hosea (6:6), “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.” The prophet Micah (6:8) asked, “He hath shown thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”

In the same way Jesus tells us that the true disciples of God are those who show mercy. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy.” Later on he would criticize the religious leaders of his day. “Woe to you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe the mint, dill, and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these that you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out the gnat and swallow the camel.” (Matthew 23:23)

In other words we are hypocrites when we pay attention to that which is marginal and trivial in religious life. We spend too much time on that which is unimportant, fighting over issues that will never improve anyone’s lives, and dithering about the inconsequential. The most important question for any Christian and any Christian congregation is that of justice and mercy and faith. Justice and mercy and faith are what we are meant to be about. Is our relationship with each other based on these qualities or not? Do these qualities underwrite every church meeting, program, and worship service? I think of the teacher who asked her students to bring to class a declaration and a symbol of their religion. The next day she called on the first child who stood up and said, “I’m a Roman Catholic and this is a crucifix.”

The second child stood up and said, "I am a Jew and this is the Star of David."

The third child arose and said, "I'm a Baptist and this is a casserole."

When you ask someone in the community what they think about your church do they say justice, and mercy, and faith?

Regardless of whether you are a Roman Catholic, a Jew, or a Baptist, mercy is one of the most important characteristics of our relationships with one another. I am talking about the demonstrable acts of mercy that meet the earthly needs of people and their spiritual well being.

I remember living in the rural north Georgia town of Clermont. We did not often get accumulating snow. But when we did the Haynes brothers, Jimmy and Michael, would get out on their tractors and scrape the driveways of their neighbors. These were not the short driveways of the suburbs but were sometimes long and winding. They were especially attentive to the elderly and would shovel their sidewalks and steps up to their houses. Sometimes it would take them all morning. They absolutely refused to accept any money for it. They always did it cheerfully and it never occurred to them to ask if they should do it. Such mercy was in their character.

When young Glen Ryder suffered a ruptured aneurism in his brain the whole community showed up to gather, bind, and store his hay. Or I think about the woman who runs a daycare out of her home. Most of her clients are single mothers. She asks them to pay what they can afford. There are times when some of the moms cannot

pay at all. It does not matter. The woman finds joy in loving the children, keeping them safe, and allowing the struggling mother to keep her job and provide for her family as best she can. That is the mercy that the Hebrew and Christian bibles are talking about. These are the kind of actions that say, “Yes, we are all in this together. We are a community and these are the kinds of things that we do to help each other thrive.”

When Jesus attacked the hypocrites he did so in full recognition that these were religious leaders who had a major responsibility for sustaining a social vision. But in truth, these ministers and priests had collaborated with an exploitive and oppressive economic and political system. By any definition, co-operation with Rome meant an unjust and cruel tyranny over the working peasants. His judgment of them is not simply a matter of their private faith but a profound question of their public religion in relationship to the state. He saw Rome as an imperial occupying power that defiled Israel and compromised Jewish ethics. I think Jesus believed that authentic religious leaders served God and human beings by defending human rights and freedom. You remember, God’s justice and mercy and faith. Jesus might lift up the example of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. He wrote the following letter to President Jimmy Carter in 1980. The letter is long, especially in the context of a sermon. Please listen and bear with me. Mercy always takes the better part of a day.

San Salvador
February 17, 1980

Dear Mr. President:

In the last few days, news has appeared in the national press that worries me greatly. According to the reports, your government is studying the possibility of economic and military support and assistance to the present government junta.

Because you are a Christian and because you have shown that you want to defend human rights, I venture to set forth for you my pastoral point of view in regard to this news and to make a specific request of you.

I am very concerned by the news that the government of the United States is planning to further El Salvador's arms race by sending military equipment and advisors to "train three Salvadoran battalions in logistics, communications, and intelligence." If this information from the papers is correct, instead of favoring greater justice and peace in El Salvador, your government's contribution will undoubtedly sharpen the injustice and the repression inflicted on the organized people, whose struggle has often been for respect for their most basic human rights.

The present government junta and, especially, the armed forces and security forces have unfortunately not demonstrated their capacity to resolve in practice the nation's serious political and structural problems. For the most part, they have resorted to repressive violence, producing a total of deaths and injuries much greater than under the previous military regime, whose systematic violation of human rights was reported by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

The brutal form in which the security forces recently evicted and murdered the occupiers of the headquarters of the Christian Democratic Party, even though the junta and the party apparently did not authorize the operation, is an indication that the junta and the Christian Democrats do not govern the country, but that political power is in the hands of unscrupulous military officers who know only how to repress the people and favor the interests of the Salvadoran oligarchy.

If it is true that last November a "group of six Americans was in El Salvador...providing \$200,000 in gas masks and flak jackets and teaching how to use them against demonstrators," you ought to be informed that it is evident that since the security forces, with increased personal protection and efficiency, have even more violently repressed the people, using deadly weapons.

For this reason, given that as a Salvadoran and archbishop of the archdiocese of San Salvador, I have an obligation to see that faith and justice reign in my country, I ask you, if you truly want to defend human rights:

- to forbid that military aid be given to the Salvadoran government;
- to guarantee that your government will not intervene directly or indirectly, with military, economic, diplomatic, or other pressures, in determining the destiny of the Salvadoran people;

In these moments, we are living through a grave economic and political crisis in our country, but it is certain that increasingly the people are awakening and organizing and have begun to prepare themselves to manage and be responsible for the future of El Salvador, as the only ones capable of overcoming the crisis.

It would be unjust and deplorable for foreign powers to intervene and frustrate the Salvadoran people, to repress them and keep them from deciding autonomously the economic and political course that our nation should follow. It would be to violate a right that the Latin American bishops, meeting at Puebla, recognized publicly when we spoke of “the legitimate self-determination of our peoples, which allows them to organize according to their own spirit and the course of their history and to cooperate in a new international order” (Puebla, 505).

I hope that your religious sentiments and your feelings for the defense of human rights will move you to accept my petition, thus avoiding greater bloodshed in this suffering country.

Sincerely,

Oscar A. Romero
Archbishop²

Nearly five weeks later, on March 23, 1980 Archbishop Romero delivered a sermon urging Christian Salvadoran soldiers to heed the call of God’s love by refusing to carry out any government order that represses or violates basic human rights. The next day he arrived at the small chapel of La Divina Providencia hospital to celebrate mass. It is said that as he lifted the Eucharistic host he was shot, his blood splattering into the chalice. Oscar Romero died on the floor of the chapel underneath the large crucifix of Christ. He was murdered by one of the notorious death squads of the Salvadoran military that was funded by the Carter and Reagan administrations. Two days after his funeral the U.S. House Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations approved President Carter’s request for “non lethal” military aid to El Salvador.

² www.share-elsalvador.org/25anniv/romero-carter.html, downloaded 7/10/10.

You might wonder why I should tell such a sad story. It does not make us feel good. That is true if we only understand mercy as a sentiment. If mercy is only emotive we only want to hear happy stories. Romero's murder is a tragic tale if it only makes us uncomfortable. Bishop Romero's letter is an act of mercy on two counts: (1) He gives witness to and protests the brutal abuse of his people. (2) He calls upon President Carter to be an agent of mercy. If we understand mercy as the action of grace, either by plowing a snowy driveway or speaking the truth to corrupt authority, then the story of Oscar Romero is one of powerful justice and mercy and faith.

University Congregational Church is creating a hygiene pantry in partnership with Open Door, Breakthrough Club, and Interfaith Ministry. That is mercy. Giving hygiene products such as soap, toothbrushes, and deodorant to poor and low-income people is demonstrable mercy. Confronting the kind of social, economic, and political policies that help create their poverty is demonstrable mercy. Jesus' condemnation of the religious leaders of his day suggests to me that mercy is private and public. It is personal and communal.

God's mercy is deep and wide – deeper and wider than the sea. God's mercy shines on all that is charitable and all that is bleak. This truth flows through the blood, down to the marrow, of the Christian Church. It is no wonder that one of the earliest prayers of Church was:

Kyrie eleison.
Christi eleison.
Kyrie eleison.

You know what that means. Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy.
May this house always be a house of mercy. *Finis*