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“Blessed are the Merciful”

The parable of The Good Samaritan ends with Jesus asking the lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer replied, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

I’m interested in that word mercy. God’s mercy is mentioned repeatedly in the Bible, yet I feel like we don’t hear much or talk much about it. I want to share with you an experience I had related to mercy. I don’t know if you were aware of this or if you would remember. There used to be a movement called Jubilee 2000. It was based on a concept found in the Hebrew Bible.

The Jubilee was a year of restoration taking place every 49 years. In the year of Jubilee, Hebrew slaves and prisoners were to be freed. Debts were to be forgiven. For those who fell onto hard times and lost their land, the land would return to the original owner. Jubilee was God’s way of ensuring that poverty was not a permanent condition. Families would not be destitute from one generation to the next.

Jubilee 2000 was a movement with the hope of convincing the world’s wealthiest nations to forgive the debt of the world’s poorest nations by the year 2000. I heard someone talking about this initiative at a denominational gathering. He described the crushing poverty around the world. You’ve probably seen the statistics. The World Bank estimates 46% of the world’s population survives on less than \$5.50 a day. He described the physical and psychic toll of that kind of poverty.

There were many in the audience who were not sure how they felt about Jubilee 2000. What would it mean to suddenly forgive all that debt? What kind of a society would we have if people didn’t pay back their loans? It may have worked well 3000 years ago, but this is today.

Then, the speaker said something that made a big impact. He said, “Forgiving the debt of these nations is not even about justice. It’s about mercy.” When he reframed it in that way, I think a lot of us felt convicted. It hit home that, among all the things God cares about: service and justice, mercy is really what God desires.

I think that's a message many of us may need to hear. If God was primarily just and treated us the way we deserved, some of us would be in trouble. Ultimately, God is merciful to us. God forgives us over and over. In return, I think God expects us to be merciful with others.

I think that's what the parable of The Good Samaritan is about. A lawyer stepped up to test Jesus. He asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said, "You're an expert in the law. You tell me. What do you find in the law of Moses?"

Drawing from the Hebrew Bible books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the lawyer said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus responded, "Good answer. Love God. Love your neighbor. Do this, and you will live."

The lawyer was not done, however. The text says that he wanted to "justify himself." He wanted to have the word neighbor defined, because he wanted boundaries. He wanted to know who is my neighbor and who is not my neighbor? Where are we drawing the line?

That's when Jesus launched into his story. A man was traveling the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Robbers stripped him, beat him, and left him for dead. A priest and a Levite, two Jewish religious leaders, walked past without helping. We don't know exactly why. Then, Jesus said something that would have scandalized his audience. A Samaritan happens by. The Jewish people despised Samaritans. Samaritans weren't even allowed in Jerusalem.

Here's the turning point in the parable. Unlike the priest and the Levite, the Samaritan was "moved with pity." I am intrigued by that little detail. Unlike the priest and the Levite, he was moved to respond. Then, he attended to the man the way we would hope anyone would.

Jesus asked the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The lawyer replied, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." Go and do likewise. That's the take away.

The Samaritan was moved to be merciful. I think we struggle with being moved by the plight of others. One dictionary defines mercy as "kind or compassionate treatment to

someone in distress.” Someone else defined it as “willingness to enter into the chaos of others so as to respond to their needs.”

After looking at The Good Samaritan in our Bible study this week, someone suggested we need a movement of kindness in our world today. I think it was widely agreed we are experiencing a supply chain problem for things like kindness, mercy, and compassion.

Studies have shown the busier we get, the less apt we are to respond to appeals for charity. There is evidence that our fast-paced lives might be contributing to the lack of kindness, compassion, and mercy in our society.

Of course, the Internet may be a contributing factor as well. When you’re engaging with strangers, without face-to-face contact, it’s easy to be insulting or to cut a person down. We hear so much today about fatigue: pandemic fatigue, compassion fatigue. I would not be surprised if exhaustion makes being merciful to those in distress a little bit harder.

I think it’s a mark of spiritual maturity when we begin to incorporate mercy into our thinking and into the ways we relate to people. For example, I was thinking about immigration and people coming to the U.S. for political asylum. I know we have our laws and procedures. We need to maintain boundaries, but what does God desire of us? Jesus made the hero of the parable a Samaritan, precisely because God isn’t so concerned about the boundaries we create. God desires mercy for those in distress.

I know I’ve been talking about some heavy issues, but I think we can incorporate mercy into our everyday lives, in small ways. When an employee or co-worker is struggling with life, to cut that person a little slack and offer some assistance. When a child or a spouse is getting on your last nerve, to respond with patience willingness to help.

I once encountered someone who was ready to assist me in my distress in a surprising way. Years ago, I lived north of Boston and I commuted to work on route 495. One morning, it was snowing while I was on my way to work. The roads were very slippery. Of course, I was driving too fast, in the passing lane, when I lost control and spun into the median.

I didn’t hit anything, but I was stuck in the snow. I couldn’t go forward. I couldn’t go back. I got out of my vehicle to analyze the situation when, immediately, a young guy

pulled up behind me in his four-wheel-drive pickup. Without saying anything, he grabbed a shovel out of the back of his truck and started shoveling the snow around my tires.

Before long, he had me dug out. He just took his shovel, hopped into his truck, and drove off. For me, that guy was a godsend. Obviously, I've never forgotten that small act of kindness. But here's the thing. Every December, I put a shovel in the back of my car and carry it with me. It's not just to dig myself out if I get stuck again. I'm waiting for the day when I see somebody else get themselves stuck in a snow bank. When that day comes, I'm going to grab that shovel, and start digging.

I think mercy can be contagious. I think God delights in that. The Jubilee 2000 campaign led to the cancelation of 100 billion dollars owed by 35 of the poorest countries. I wonder if we could make our own little Jubilee, not about canceling debt. That's beyond our capability, but many of us can carry a shovel. All of us can engage in small acts of kindness and find ways to respond to the distress of others.

The reality is every one of us have been that person in the ditch. Every one of us has been a recipient of mercy either from God or someone else. I want to be the one who shows mercy, because I know I've been shown mercy many times. Every day of my life, God gives me a new beginning. God hears my prayers. God forgives me.

I'm a recipient of God's mercy and I want to be merciful.