



Pastor's Wednesday Message - July 8, 2020

MERCY ME

"I desire mercy not sacrifice." Those were Jesus' words to a group of nice religious folks who didn't react charitably when they observed Jesus' merciful manner. They were not pleased that Jesus failed to condemn sinners and tax collectors, but instead expressed genuine care for them and even sought relationship with them. Actually, to be more precise, Jesus told these not so merciful religious folks, "Go and learn what this means; I desire Mercy, Not sacrifice". - Matt. 9:13

He said to them Go and learn what this means, as in, apparently you don't remember what God spoke through the prophet Hosea, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings." (Hosea 6:6) Apparently you do not understand that even more important than fastidious religious observance is a life that proclaims mercy and reflects the heart of God.

These words about the centrality of mercy, loving-kindness and demonstrated grace are timely words for us today. I say that because it seems to me that mercy and grace are in particularly short supply in these days of pandemic - related frustration. Our lives have been thoroughly disrupted. The social distancing and draconian health requirements are cloying. Uncertainty about our jobs, our businesses and our economy is frightening. Worries about our kids' safety, their happiness and their schooling are getting to us. We're restricted, confined and regulated to the point that it causes us severe psychological and spiritual chafing. The ones we'd normally look to for comfort and calm aren't available to us, at least not face to face. It is supremely frustrating.

All of these frustrations, fears and unresolvable uncertainties have led to a place where even us good religious people are running a mercy deficit. Patience is thin. Anger seems much more readily accessible than mercy and grace. Even as we continue to pray and give glory to God we act too often as though we never learned what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice".

I learned that at the Village Market. As I chose an avocado a few weeks ago, in a store where there were, perhaps, 5 other patrons, this person felt the need to reach in right across in front on me to grab one too. Apparently, she had to have that very Avocado at that instant. I didn't say anything, but inside I was really riled up! Man

that was stupid! It's a pandemic, lady! What is it about social distancing that you don't understand! I was annoyed, angry, perturbed, but the M word was far from me. I didn't have a single merciful thought. I could have backed away. I could have said a prayer for her safety, and for safety of others. I could have approached her with the same mercy I receive from my Lord even when I act stupidly or without appropriate consideration of others. But frankly, the mercy that marks the life of the faithful follower of Jesus was missing. Perhaps I still need to "go and learn what this means."

I talked with our property manager in Arizona on Monday. She was rather wound up about how "incredibly stupid" people are. (Her words, not mine.) "Did you hear that we've had young people here in Arizona holding COVID parties where they purposely invite guests who have the virus? They put money in a pot & they try to get COVID. Whoever gets the disease first gets the pot. It makes no sense!"

I have to admit, my first reaction, being the good pastor that I am, was not about mercy. It was another "M" word. Morons. I confess that I could think of nothing but how irresponsible those folks are being with their own lives and the lives of others whom they might infect. Sinfully irresponsible! Sinfully uncaring! I entertained thoughts about "poetic justice" (a nicer sounding phrase than retributive justice).

I sped past any thoughts of mercy right to being offended, angered and aggrieved because frankly, this whole COVID thing has me on edge. But here's the thing, even if these folks intentionally run headlong toward suffering like lemmings to the sea, and even if they are guilty of massive foolishness, don't they need mercy more than disdain? Don't they need mercy more than anything? Don't they *really* need my prayers for what they may soon encounter? Maybe I need to go and learn what this means... like Jesus said.

The Streets of Chicago flow red with blood. 80, 90 even 100 are shot weekend after weekend and dozens are killed. Last weekend stray bullets from the guns of 3 guys bent on retaliation took the life of a 7-year-old girl. The story took my breath away. What an unthinkable, God-awful thing! I had an immediate retributive thought for the 3 in the car from which the shots rang out. The "M-word" didn't flash into my mind until later. It came as I thought about the painfully heavy hearts of that little girl's family, and their friends. Does this world need me to add even more anger to the mix, or does it need me to share God's mercy and loving-kindness? It was not until much later that I considered the possibility of mercy for the murderers. What pain was in their lives that they could so easily take the life of another person, let alone a child? What would become of them? Would all that they could have become be wasted? Will they molder in prison? Will they die in a similar act of retribution? I get it. These guys are guilty of terrible stuff, but isn't it true that mercy and grace really can only go to those who don't deserve them? These days, in the midst of the terrible and the troubling, my repository of grace runs shallow and I give every evidence of needing to "Go and learn what this means." My disgust won't heal anything. God's mercy heals all.

This week I read the account of a group of Episcopal priests and church workers who were gassed, shot with projectiles and roughly removed from the Episcopal Church where they had gathered and with which they were affiliated. They were removed so that the head of state who lives across the street at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue could have a photo opportunity holding a Bible aloft with the church as a backdrop. Honestly, it made my blood boil! There was apparently no consideration given to the fact that the Bible that was held high as a prop is the same one that speaks of blessing for the merciful, that teaches gentleness and compassion, that touts righteousness and justice. There was apparently no thought given to the fact that the act of abusing these church workers stood in stark opposition to the message of the book that was displayed. I was righteously indignant and aggrieved as a fellow member of the clergy. It was so utterly unholy that I am still struggling to find words of mercy around this situation. Of course, that only proves I still have work to do. I need to do like Jesus said, "Go and learn what this means."

I've had my very first Internet troll; A person who spoke some uncharitable, unkind words on a church-related website. It seemed to me self-evident that someone who wanted to connect with the community of faith should have been more merciful and gracious. I should also admit that as a disciple of the merciful messiah, my reaction to the naysayer probably should have been more merciful too - or merciful at all. It should have been more immediately evident to me that folks who seek connection with the church, however they do it, are probably doing so out of a felt need to experience mercy, grace, acceptance and love. That is, after all, the unique blessing of the Gospel. It's what folks can expect from Jesus. It's what they should expect from followers like me. It's more evidence that I need to "go and learn what this means."

Please don't get me wrong. Most of the time, I am a pretty merciful guy. I try to share grace and hope and compassion consistently. I try to do that even when folks make it especially challenging for me. But I wanted to be honest about the fact that sometimes it's a struggle, because I suspect that it's probably your struggle too.

These strange, destabilizing, disorienting times can make it tough even for us good religious people. Patience runs thin. Anger seems much more readily accessible in the moment than mercy and grace. Even as we continue to pray and give glory to God we act too often as though we never learned what this means, "I desire mercy, Not sacrifice".

I encourage you to go and learn what Jesus meant. Go and live mercifully. It seems clear to me that in these most troubling, confusing times, the world needs way more healing mercy... and less of just about everything else.

Pastor Brown