

THE BLESSING OF MERCY

a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, July 17, 2016

Based on Psalm 103:8-12, Matthew 18:23-35, Matt. 5:7

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, "Bless You—finding God's blessing in a life full of challenge." We have noted in this series that blessing, in the Biblical view, is more of a spiritual than a material condition. We can talk, of course, about being blessed with prosperity and health and success, but people can have all those things and still be miserable. Blessedness is above all a condition of spiritual wholeness. The spiritual nature of blessedness comes to the fore in Jesus' central teaching about blessedness, in the Beatitudes—the eight "blessed are" sayings with which Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount. We have considered several of the Beatitudes already in this sermon series, and today we are looking at the fifth Beatitude, where Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive—or they shall obtain—mercy." (Matthew 5:7) Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

The word "mercy"—in its Hebrew forms and in the Greek word "eleos," which is the word in our passage—has a major role in the Bible. The Bible speaks often of the mercy of God, as in the passage we heard this morning from the Psalms, which said, "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." The Bible also speaks of people showing mercy to one another.

In a broad sense, to be "merciful" means to show consideration and compassion to those who are weak or in need. In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan who helps the man by the roadside is described at the end as "the one who showed mercy." (eleos) (Luke 10:37) When we think of Jesus himself, he was certainly "one who showed mercy," as He constantly showed kindness to the downtrodden and the needy.

This congregation is merciful. Last Sunday, we made an appeal for a girl named Zanetah, who is the niece of Andy and Josephine Lepp, and who is suffering from sickle cell disease in Uganda, and who could be cured, but only through a very expensive medical procedure. People were invited to contribute to a fund for Zanetah, and just last Sunday, we raised approximately \$3500. Yesterday our Mountain T.O.P. mission team returned from a week of home repair or day camp ministry in the Cumberland mountains of Tennessee. Our congregation gave thousands of dollars to support the team; the team members gave their sweat. It was hot, and they worked hard, all to help people who are less fortunate. Today we are being invited to contribute to UMCOR, which helps people around the world suffering from disasters. It is yet another avenue through which we show mercy.

You will note that all these activities are quite the opposite of what people typically think of when they think of being blessed. The common idea is that to be blessed is to be the recipient of lots of good stuff. Jesus says that we are blessed as we give mercy to others.

So to be merciful, first of all, is to engage in what we often call "acts of mercy." Precisely here we see a key feature of the Christian life, which stands in bold contrast to

much of what is going on in the world. Our headlines are dominated by acts of terror. The horrendous mass murder in Nice, France, this past week was one more expression of the depths of human sinfulness—how when people turn from God they can descend into great evil. But what a difference we see when people are genuinely touched by God's grace. Every time we engage in acts of mercy, we bear witness to what Christ can do in human hearts, as He leads us to live in compassion to others. He is leading us in that direction as he says, "Blessed are the merciful."

But then there is a further meaning of the Biblical term, *eleos*, or mercy. It is to show forgiveness.

This is where being merciful can get really tough. Not only does it seem well nigh impossible to forgive a mass murderer; it is difficult to forgive average people who are not criminals but who nevertheless wrong us in some troubling way. If we are kindhearted people, it is not too difficult to be moved to acts of compassion. When, for example, we see pictures of children in need, our heart goes out to them, and we naturally want to help them. But when someone does us wrong in a serious way, our heart does not go out to them. We are not at all just naturally inclined to forgive. Forgiveness is difficult.

And yet forgiveness is one of our greatest human needs, both as individuals and as an entire society. We are flawed human beings, so we are always making blunders; we disappoint ourselves, and we hurt one another. Without forgiveness, we become stuck in bitterness, regret, anger, and despair. The only way to blessedness is through forgiveness.

And forgiveness, in enormous measure, is what Jesus brings. As Jesus goes to the cross, He takes all our human wrongs upon himself. As Paul would say, "When we were dead in sin, God made us alive together with Christ when He forgave our sin, nailing it all to the cross." (Colossians 2:13-14) Through Christ we can each be truly and completely forgiven. Thus Jesus fulfills the promise of God through the prophet Jeremiah: "I will be forgive their sin and will remember their sins no more." [Jeremiah 31:34]. And so in Jesus we can experience what the Psalmist was talking about in Psalm 103—"As far as the east is from the west, so far He removes our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:12) Jesus referred to that experience of mercy in the Beatitudes when he said, "they will receive mercy."

This then is precisely what we need to do in our own hearts—we need to receive the forgiveness of God that is offered to us in Jesus Christ. As is it is said in the book of Hebrews, "Let us come to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy." (*eleos*) (Hebrews 4:16)

But in order to truly receive God's forgiveness, we need also to show forgiveness. Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful (that is, those who show mercy), for they will receive mercy." This message—that there is a connection between receiving mercy and showing mercy—is a point that Jesus makes emphatically. We heard it the parable that was read this morning.

Jesus told about a servant who owed a huge debt to his master which he could possibly pay. The master was about to sell that servant and the servant's family into slavery in order to recover the debt, but the servant pleaded for mercy, and the master forgave the

servant the entire debt. Then the servant went out and encountered a fellow servant who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized that servant by the throat and said, "Pay me what you owe me." The fellow servant pleaded for mercy, but the servant who had just himself been forgiven by his master refused to extend mercy but had his fellow servant thrown into prison. Jesus concluded the parable as follows:

"Then his lord summoned the servant and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy (*eleos*) on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt." [Matt. 18:32-34] Then just to be sure we get the point, Jesus says, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." [Matt. 18:35]

I cannot think of any area where Jesus is stronger or clearer in His teaching. His message that receiving God's forgiveness is connected to showing forgiveness is also enshrined at the very center of in the Lord's prayer, in the phrase, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Why does Jesus place such emphasis on showing forgiveness? Perhaps it is because He knew that this would be one of the hardest things for human beings to do. When someone does us a real wrong, it is difficult to forgive. Yet Jesus says that to refuse to forgive is to block ourselves from God's mercy.

There's a story about the 18th century British general James Oglethorpe, how he once caught a servant stealing a bottle of wine—a good bottle of wine—and he had the servant severely punished. John Wesley—our Methodist founder—heard about the incident and approached the general, asking him to find it in his heart to forgive the servant. "Sir," the general replied, "I never forgive." Wesley replied, "Then, sir, I hope you never offend."

The refusal to forgive is sadly characteristic of human life. Do we not see it in the news every day? People harbor resentments, and they then express those resentments in belligerence, strife, and sometimes horrible acts of violence.

Jesus leads us in a completely different direction. He is leading us into a life of mercy—a life in which we receive God's forgiveness, even for the greatest sins, and in which we show God's forgiveness, even for the greatest wrongs—a life in which, finally, we embody God's compassion and mercy.

The good news is that God is merciful. When we enter into God's mercy, offered to us freely in Jesus Christ, we can finally forgive ourselves, we can forgive one another, and we can live then in the love of God, and so find blessedness—a life in God's peace and joy.