

“Mercy, Mercy Me”

Sermon for First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 25, 2013

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Texts: Luke 13:10-17 and Hebrews 12: 18-29

Luke 13: 10-17

The Healing of the Bent Over Woman

10 Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹ And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” ¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

14 But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.”

15 But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?”

17 When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Hebrews 12:18-29

18 You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, ‘If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.’) Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear.’) But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

25 See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.’ This phrase ‘Yet once more’ indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

Mercy, Mercy Me

The late Marvin Gaye was in Detroit when he called Barry Gordy on the phone.

Barry Gordy was on a well-deserved vacation in the Bahamas,

kicking back and relaxing after a decade and a half of hard work

building up Motown Records.

Over the long distance phone call he heard an excited Marvin Gaye describe to him

about a concept album he was creating.

Marvin told Barry that he was singing the story of a Viet Nam Veteran

who returned home alive only to encounter poverty, taxes, violence in the streets,

protest marches, and, in the midst of chaos and confusion,

the liberating presence of God.

As Barry Gordy tells the story, he was thinking as Marvin was talking,

“This does not sound like Motown to me.”

This did not sound like the kind of music he expected

American teenagers wanted to hear over transistor radios.

He told Marvin to cease and desist; to stop recording; to wait until he came back.

However, when he arrived in Detroit,

he discovered that Marvin Gaye had already released the album,

calling it “What’s Going On”.

Barry was convinced it would be a bust;

for the second time in a month he was wrong.

Besides being the first Motown album to honor the names of the studio musicians,

“What’s Going On” went on to become Motown’s highest selling album to date.

This 1971 release was revolutionary, hip, urbane, contemporary, pastoral and prophetic.

Rolling Stone magazine has since identified it as one of the best of all time.

Marvin Gaye’s radical concept musical offering

rocked the Billboard charts with the hit singles:

“What’s Going On” “Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)”
and “Mercy, Mercy Me”

In telling the story of a fragmented soul looking for wholeness in his community,

Marvin’s music connects the listener with the deepest, truest meaning of mercy.

Mercy is our disposition to exercise compassion,

to grant a boon or favor to someone or a people in need.

Mercy is our willingness to spare another soul in pain,

especially when we extend mercy to neighbors

over whom we have some degree of power or advantage.

William Shakespeare expanded on the quality of mercy in The Merchant of Venice:

“The quality of mercy is not strain'd, It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven Upon the place beneath.

It is twice blest: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. [1]

Our practice of mercy reflects outwardly to the world

our inner, spiritual connection

with the nature and nurture of God.

In the 23rd Psalm, King David said,
*“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me the rest of my days,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”*

The Prophet Micah (6:8) said, *“Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God.”*

As Jesus said, *“Be compassionate as your Creator is compassionate.”* (Luke 6: 36)

Jesus of Nazareth said this with deep conviction

that through mercy and compassion

our humanity grows into its fullness.[2]

Our beloved Lillie Sapp said, *“Having mercy is how you should act.”*

Mercy, Mercy Me

This morning’s Gospel lesson tells the simple yet powerful story

about the day Jesus of Nazareth saw a woman who was bent over,

and she had been so for 18 years.

18 years is how long

some of us raise our children from birth to adulthood, and they raise us!

18 years and counting is how long

some women have stooped to pick up their husband’s socks.

18 years is how long

she may have tried to break through the oppression of sexism.

Someone once said the ceiling is not lined with glass; it is lined with men.

18 years is a long time

to suffer the pain of carrying the burden of life’s choices and circumstances.

10 Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath.

11 And just then there appeared a woman

with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years.

She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.

12 When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said,

“Woman, you are set free from your ailment.”

13 When he laid his hands on her,

immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

“Without being asked for a healing miracle,

Jesus heals the woman.

Jesus heals her as a sort of spontaneous overflowing of mercy.”[3]

“Even if Jesus had not [healed her],

he still would have been merciful.

[Last week we reflected on the omnipresence of God in Christ Jesus.]

He was present as the God of mercy.

Even if Jesus had healed no one on that day in the synagogue,

just [knowing] that he was there,

[Emmanuel,] God with us in mercy,

it would have been enough.”[4]

Mercy, Mercy Me

In mercy meet the pastoral and prophetic.

God's mercy has the power to set people free.

The mercy of God began the moment Jesus saw her.

He noticed her; he cared for her; he did not ignore or pass her by.

Jesus told her that she did not need to stay there,

bent over and pained and drained,

that she could be free to be.

He reached out to her, and he set her free.

She was released from her burdens,

liberated and loosed upon the world as glory from glory.

Jesus sees us.

Jesus frees us.

We, too, know of such burdens, of the weight of the ways of the world.

We, too, seek liberation, to be set free of whatever holds us down or back or apart.

Jesus sees you and he speaks to you and he reaches out to you.

Freely he gives you his gifts of liberation,

and freely do we receive his love.

We who have received mercy are called to extend mercy to one another.

"Be compassionate as your Creator in heaven is compassionate."

Mercy, Mercy Me

We do mercy a disservice

if we do not speak with each other

of Satan's temptation for us to deny it.

Jesus addressed the deniers of mercy;

He looked at them just as he saw the bent over women: with love.

No one is ignored or forgotten or neglected or denied love

in the eyes of Emmanuel, God with us.

Jesus said, "*You hypocrites!*"

*Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger,
and lead it away to give it water?*

¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham

whom Satan bound for eighteen long years,

be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?"

17 When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame;

and the entire crowd was rejoicing

at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Here meet the pastoral and the prophetic:

the Church is called to stand with the bent over women,

to take a stand as liberators of the oppressed,

as agitators of the status quo, if need be, if it is God's will,

if that is what it takes to lift up our voices of mercy,

calling out for those pressed down

to be lifted up and set free.

The Church can do this;

the Church can be this.

The motto of the Christian Church says that

we are a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.

Sounds like a call to be merciful, to serve where meet the pastoral and the prophetic.

Let the Church of Jesus Christ be both pastoral and prophetic

for the sake of the hurt and hurting,

the lost, the last and the least,

and the disinherited, disenfranchised, and dispossessed.

Or we could take a stand with the hard-hearted Priests and Pharisees and say,

“Hey, we would love to help but it’s the Sabbath

and now is just not a good time.

Why don’t you wait a little longer?”

“Why act with mercy now?” ask the privileged, the already healed, the powerful.

Why not wait until the Sabbath is over;

what difference will a few hours make?

You’ve been in bondage for 18 years;

would another 18 hours really make a difference?

Why not wait until later, when we are all ready?

In the early 1960s some Americans said to other Americans:

You haven’t had the vote for 100 years since Emancipation;

would another ten years make a difference?

Today we hear some Americans saying to other Americans:

You haven’t had the civil right to marry the one you love for over 224 years;

would another few years make a difference?

Does it appear to you that sometimes people who have

think that those who do not have
can -- and should – wait?

People on the inside want those on the outside to wait.

Now is not a convenient time.

Be patient.

All will work out in the long run.

Mercy, Mercy Me

Here we are on the eve of the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington.

In August of 1963,

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and 250,000 Americans,
including my father,

marched shoulder-to-shoulder to advocate

for every man and woman to have the right to vote.

George Calvert returned home to tell his wife and sons,

his church and city the glorious story

of people of all colors and ethnicities and walks of life

standing together to demand that every voice be heard.

Ballots, not bullets;

hope, not hate;

mercy, mercy, not me, me.

Here we are, 50 years later,

on the dawn of the dismantling of the Voting Rights Act.

If we can effectively and religiously register for the draft

every 18 year old American male

— and we do so with ease and efficiency --
then we can certainly register to vote every adult in the country,
and then communicate to each and every one:
*“Now go forth and practice citizenship.
Be a living presence of citizenship in our nation,
starting with your own community but not ending there.
Get informed. Get involved.
Get up and get out and may your voice be heard and your hands put to work.
We need every single soul across this great land
to be a living presence in our nation and world.
In the mercy you practice meet the pastoral and prophetic love of God.
Refrain from the temptation to negate the voices we fear might disagree,
and instead commit our church and city and country to empower every soul
to be a witness of the omnipresence of God.”*

Dr. Martin Luther King knew a thing or two

about the mercy of God

in times of trial and tribulation, temptation and triumph.

In Dr. King met the pastoral and prophetic ministry of mercy.

He said:

“My Bible tells me that Good Friday comes before Easter.

For the Crown we wear there is the Cross we must bear.

Bear it for truth.

Bear it for justice.

Bear it, for truth pressed to earth will rise again.

Bear it, for you reap what you sow.

Bear it, for the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Mercy.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

[1] William Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, Act 4 scene 1

[2] Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life, by McNeil, Morrison, and Nouwen, 1982, P. 7

[3] Willimon, Pulpit Resource, P. 34

[4] Willimon, Pulpit Resource, P. 34