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***“Learn from Me”***

**Crossroads Sermon Series: Personal Distress at a Crossroad**

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur GA

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, June 21, 2020

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

**Holy Scriptures: Genesis 21: 8-21; Psalm 86: 1-10, 16-17; Matthew 11: 28-30**

Resources: Charles Cousar, et al, Texts for Preaching—Year A  
Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock, The People’s New Testament Commentary

**Genesis 21:8-21 (NRSV)**

<sup>8</sup>The child grew and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. <sup>9</sup>But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>10</sup>So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.” <sup>11</sup>The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son.

<sup>12</sup>But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. <sup>13</sup>As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.”

<sup>14</sup>So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

<sup>15</sup>When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. <sup>16</sup>Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.

<sup>17</sup>And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. <sup>18</sup>Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” <sup>19</sup>Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

<sup>20</sup>God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. <sup>21</sup>He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

**Footnotes:**

- a. Genesis 21:9 Gk Vg: Heb lacks *with her son Isaac*

## **Psalm 86**

- <sup>1</sup> Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me,  
for I am poor and needy.
- <sup>2</sup> Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you;  
save your servant who trusts in you.  
You are my God; <sup>3</sup> be gracious to me, O Lord,  
for to you do I cry all day long.
- <sup>4</sup> Gladden the soul of your servant,  
for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
- <sup>5</sup> For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving,  
abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you.
- <sup>6</sup> Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer;  
listen to my cry of supplication.
- <sup>7</sup> In the day of my trouble I call on you,  
for you will answer me.
- <sup>8</sup> There is none like you among the gods, O Lord,  
nor are there any works like yours.
- <sup>9</sup> All the nations you have made shall come  
and bow down before you, O Lord,  
and shall glorify your name.
- <sup>10</sup> For you are great and do wondrous things;  
you alone are God.
- <sup>16</sup> Turn to me and be gracious to me;  
give your strength to your servant;  
save the child of your serving girl.
- <sup>17</sup> Show me a sign of your favor,  
so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame,  
because you, Lord, have helped me and comforted me.

## **Matthew 11:28-30 (NRSV)**

- <sup>28</sup> "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

## ***Sermon***

## ***Learn from Me***

Jesus Christ said,

*“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,  
and I will give you rest.  
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me;  
for I am gentle and humble in heart,  
and you will find rest for your souls.  
For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*

Today’s theme was inspired by a Disciple of Jesus Christ  
who was encouraged by a Scout leader to join a church,  
to commit their young soul to Christ,  
and that, they say, has made all the difference.

At a crossroad of this blessed soul’s life,  
a mentor inspired tapping into the Christian Faith.

You and I find ourselves in places and times of stress, regress, and distress.  
There, I pray, we tap into the Faith  
and receive new life by the mercy of God.

- Ponder the tender mercies you have received.
- Ponder what helping hand and encouraging word you heard, and how you might pass it on.

Share what you like online.

We want to know, we want to grow, we want to sow goodness and mercy, as well.

## ***Learn from Me***

They say that one night in 1935, Fiorello H. La Guardia, Mayor of New York City,  
showed up at a night court in the poorest ward of the city.

He dismissed the judge for the evening  
and took over the bench.

One case involved an elderly woman  
who was caught stealing bread to feed her grandchildren.

Mayor La Guardia said, *“I’ve got to punish you.  
Ten dollars or ten days in jail.”*

He threw \$10 into his hat.

He then fined everyone in the courtroom 50 cents for living in a city *“where,”* he said,  
*“a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat.”*

The Mayor’s hat was passed around.

She left the courtroom with her fine paid and an additional \$47.50.

That, my friends, is mercy.

We who have received new life through God's mercy know of its qualities.

In The Merchant of Venice, William Shakespeare wrote:

*"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."*

Mercy originates from God, falling like a gentle rain from above.

Mercy is our willingness to see & spare another soul in pain from pain.

Mercy is our disposition to exercise compassion,  
to grant a boon or favor to someone or a people in need.

Mercy is what we who have great troubles need, and precisely what God provides.

*"Morning by morning new mercies I see;  
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—  
"Great is Thy faithfulness," Lord, unto me!"*

[Lyrics by: Thomas Obediah Chisholm (1866-1960)]

Mercy is what beneficiaries are taught to share with one another,  
a gift of the Spirit provided by God to the world through Christ's disciples.  
Our practice of mercy reflects outwardly to the world  
our inner, spiritual connection  
with the nature and nurture of God.

And, when we come, weary and heavy laden, to life's intersections,  
crossroads of our choosing or having been presented to us,  
those times and places of challenge and opportunity,  
mercy is a divine gift given  
to help us cope with these heavy loads.

George Harrison prayed for mercy at a crossroads of his life (1973):

*Give me love  
Give me love  
Give me peace on earth  
Give me light  
Give me life  
Keep me free from birth  
Give me hope*

*Help me cope, with this heavy load  
Trying to touch and reach you with  
Heart and soul*

Singers & songwriters, poets and playwrights point us to the Holy  
for the mercy we seek, which we need at the crossroads of our lives.  
So, too, does the Bible.

We turn to the Holy Bible and one another  
for words of comfort and hope and mercy,  
and here, in red and black ink, we find mercy, aplenty.

### ***Learn from Me***

There is a common theme in these passages of Scripture:

- The Psalmist prays for rescue from great trouble.
- Hagar and Ishmael are in peril, an unimaginable trouble.
- Jesus Christ invites us to bring our troubles to Him.

In Psalm 86, the psalmist petitions God for help: God, hear my cries...

*for I am poor and needy  
for I am devoted to you  
your servant trusts in you  
you alone are my God  
to you do I cry all day long  
to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.*

The Psalmist deeply trusts in God to respond, to act, to save,  
testifying to the heavens his or her or their complete dependence on God.  
The psalmist pleads to receive new life as a result of God's mercy.  
The speaker is confident,  
confident that God will intervene,  
confident that God sees and knows the great trouble at hand,  
confident in the competence of the Lord to overcome the troubles.  
God, we shall overcome.

### ***Learn from Me***

In Genesis, God has much to overcome with the troubles that befall Hagar and Ishmael.

The passage in Genesis 21 is a tale that is deeply troubling all on its own.  
Viewed with our modern eyes,  
we see the harm and hurt beset upon Hagar and her son Ishmael.  
The original storyteller, the Elohist, however,  
saw this as a tale of God's abundant mercy.

We are not far off the mark  
when we identify violence and oppression of a woman and her child,  
innocent survivors of abuse and bearers of trauma.  
Our raw emotions and sense of outrage at injustice increase as the story progresses.

Sarah gave Hagar to Abrahamaam to have a child.  
Hagar, a slave, had no say in the matter.  
She is raped and in time bears Ishmael.  
After Sarah and Abraham have Isaac,  
Sarah saw the children playing together.  
She feared Ishmael will lay claim to his birthright as the eldest son  
and exclude Isaac.  
She insisted Hagar and the child be cast out into the desert.  
Abraham consulted with God, who appears to consent to the plan,  
yet the Lord assured Abraham that Ishmael, like Isaac,  
will also be the patriarch of a nation.

Abraham shunned Hagar and their child.  
Hagar and child wandered in the desert heat and cold.  
When the water ran out, they faced certain death.  
*Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off,  
about the distance of a bowshot; for she said,  
"Do not let me look on the death of the child."  
And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.  
17 And God heard the voice of the boy;  
and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven,  
and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid;  
for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.  
18 Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand,  
for I will make a great nation of him."*

Hagar wept.  
God heard the cries of the boy.  
An angel of God showed Hagar a well of water.  
The family is saved.  
They received life as a result of God's mercy.  
The boy grew to marry an Egyptian woman.  
The promise of God is fulfilled.  
Two historic peoples of faith are beneficiaries of God's mercy.  
Abraham is the father of both Jews and Arabs.  
Put another way, both Jews and Arabs claim Abraham as their patriarch.  
Put another way entirely,  
Hagar and Ishmael overcame human jealousy, anger, hatred, racism,  
sexism, violence, and downright meanness  
to stay alive, to survive, to thrive,  
to tell their story,  
to reshape the world,

to receive new life according to God's infinite mercy.

### ***Learn from Me***

The Psalmist, Hagar and Ishmael, our places of deep distress and even deeper hope  
bring us to meet Jesus in the Gospel.

Jesus Christ said, "*Come to me,  
all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,  
and I will give you rest.  
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me;  
for I am gentle and humble in heart,  
and you will find rest for your souls.  
For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*"

This is a summons to follow God,  
a summons Jesus says is easy; a burden that is light.  
This is an invitation to discipleship,  
one we welcome with gladness, one that seems too good to be true.  
Jesus makes no demands.  
He places no unnecessary burdens upon the whole people of God.  
He is not calling us to a code of external rules.  
Rather, this is a warm invitation to follow God the Leader (with a capital L).

### ***"Learn from me."***

Jesus takes us to school...in a good way!  
While consoling us, He is schooling us.  
Our teacher is gentle, meek, humble in heart and mind.  
Our teacher is faithful to the Creator and gentle in his call to us.  
We have a teacher who never asks us to do something He Himself would not do;  
this is the mark of a servant leader.  
He schools us, instructs us, saying, "*Learn from me,*"  
and we -- His students -- appreciate that He is modelling  
exactly what we are to emulate.

He said

*My yoke is easy:*

Yoke = a metaphor for service

Jesus places himself in the divine role:

take my yoke, follow in my path of other-centered service

Easy = suitable, easy to wear, appropriate

He said

*You will find rest:*

Rest = not an easy life of selfish ease, nor to a life of passivity;

This is a reminder that in Christ

you are delivered from artificial practices that do not help,  
Freed from practices and habits that might actually hinder,  
you are free to have direct access to God's mercy.

He said

*Learn from me:*

Learn = key word in Matthew's Gospel

Jesus says, "*Go and learn the meaning of the words:*

*Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice*" (Matthew 9:13).

To be a disciple is to accept and follow God,  
to learn, to heed Jesus' instructions  
to apply the learnings you glean,  
whenever and however and wherever you can.

The Good News is Jesus offers direct communion with God.

One need not be religious to commune with God.

One need not go to Temple or Church or a Mosque to commune with God.

Here, Jesus says, you have direct access to the comforting grace of God.

Jesus' invitation extends to the Psalmist who is poor and needy,

to Hagar and Ishmael dying of thirst in the desert,

to you and me, to one and all,

and says that there are no requirements to be blessed by God.

As we like to say in our church,

*the only requirement is knowing you don't meet the requirements.*

Here is where the Church says,

yes, you don't need to be religious to connect with God,

and yes, we have found that being connected at the crossroads  
makes all the difference.

Let us walk with you, see you, hear you,

love you as you are

so we can receive new life in Christ's infinite mercy, together.

We are learning, together,

how to cope with and release these heavy loads.

### ***Learn from Me***

By the mercy of God, we find healing for our pain, and for our community's pain.

*"Healing means moving from your pain to the pain..."*

*When you keep focusing on the specific circumstances of your pain,*

*you easily become angry, resentful, and even vindictive.*

*You are inclined to do something*

*about the externals of your pain in order to relieve it;*

*this explains why you often seek revenge.*

*But real healing comes from realizing that your own particular pain*

*is a share of humanity's pain.*



*That realization allows you to forgive your enemies  
and enter into a truly compassionate life.  
Every time you can shift your attention  
away from the external situation that caused your pain  
and focus on the pain of humanity in which you participate,  
your suffering becomes easier to bear.  
It becomes a "light burden" and an "easy yoke" (Matthew 11:30)."*

*--The Essential Henri Nouwen, Shambhala, 2009, Page 54.*

### ***Learn from Me***

"One of the stunning realities of the Christian [Faith]  
is that in a world where everything is in some state of decay,  
God's mercies never grow old.

They never run out.

They never are ill timed.

They never dry up.

They never grow weak.

They never get weary.

They never fail to meet the need.

They never disappoint.

They never, ever fail,

because they really are new every morning.

Form-fitted for the challenges, disappointments, sufferings,  
temptations, and struggles with sin within and without  
are the mercies of our Lord.

Sometimes they are:

Awe-inspiring mercies

Rebuking mercies

Strengthening mercies

Hope-giving mercies

Heart-exposing mercies

Rescuing mercies

Transforming mercies

Forgiving mercies

Provision-making mercies

Uncomfortable mercies

Glory-revealing mercies

Truth-illuminating mercies

Courage-giving mercies."

*Paul David Tripp, New Morning, New Mercies: A Daily Gospel Devotion, Crossway.*

*"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,  
and I will give you rest."*

Like you, I have had this shared with me when I ache

and I have shared these words with you when you are in distress.  
And they are enough.  
God's mercy and grace are sufficient.  
It is enough to know God cares for you, loves you, is with you,  
offers comfort and genuine concern,  
rest from your burdens, the removal of heavy burdens,  
the burdens we bear like the weight of the world is upon our shoulders,  
all this and more does Jesus Christ lift from us,  
because He loves us so.

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