

“Have Mercy!”

#4 in the “BOUNTIFUL BLESSINGS” series

Text: Matthew 5:7

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Sunday, February 20, 2011

8:30 a.m. (Chapel) , 9:20 a.m. and 10:45 am (Sanctuary)

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From Mourning toMeekness toHungering toMercy

It’s interesting to note the connections and interrelatedness among the beatitudes we’ve been exploring in our current “*Bountiful Blessings*” series. We began, as you’ll recall, noting how sacred our tears are in our lives. Next, we underscored the proper ways of being meek. And last week we took up what it means to hunger and thirst for righteousness. The video of Narayan Krishnan visited me continually since we saw it together last Sunday.¹ And it’s appropriate that one who hungers and thirsts for righteousness so generously should precede this week’s emphasis on mercy. His hungering and thirsting for righteousness are indeed merciful, and it is out of great mercy that he seeks to embody righteousness for the people of village of Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India.

In today’s beatitude – “*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy*” – we encounter one of the great truisms of the Christian gospel. There’s nothing more pertinent, nothing more germane, nothing more central to following in the footsteps of Jesus than mercy.

To his first disciples Jesus embodied all mercy, as they continually mangled their discipleship. To those who gawked at his wonder-working healing power and were inspired by his teaching and preaching, he consistently proffered mercy. Toward the vast crowds that listened to his Sermon on the Mount he had a merciful posture. Even standing before old Pilate, I get the feeling that he was manifesting gentle mercy when he responded to Pilate’s question about being “King of the Jews” by saying, “*You say that I am....*”² And we can never forget Jesus on the cross uttering those words that have become famous as the height of mercy, “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*”³

If Christian faith is about anything, it's about mercy. If the essence of Jesus' ministry and life and death and resurrection to new life are about anything, they're about mercy.

The Soundings of Mercy

This morning, I want to ask something of you and it may seem like a strange question. When did you first hear about mercy? And, there's another question that's closely related to it: When did you most recently witness mercy? As you ponder those questions, I want to offer several moments that have been soundings of mercy for me. Perhaps, in my recounting of these soundings, something will resonate, maybe even harmonize, within your own heart and soul.

I. Have Mercy - Sympathy

The first time I clearly recall hearing about mercy was from my grandmother Mammy. Once, while she was visiting us in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, she declared "Have mercy," as she read something in the newspaper. What it was in the paper that prompted her to say "Have mercy" I don't exactly know. But there was about her declaration a note of humble petition toward God to help someone in trouble. She was expressing some sort of sympathy about another person's plight.

This is what mercy is, to be sure: sympathy. To feel something for another's situation, to have a feeling of tenderness within us toward another. When the picture flashes across your computer screen or your television of the untold millions struggling to make it through the day - whether in Haiti or Peru or Indonesia - we have a feeling of sympathy.

That's partly what our Week of Compassion offerings this week and next Sunday are all about: sympathy with our brothers and sisters around the world. One of the greatest outpourings of sympathy which we've ever expressed here at Community occurred right after the tidal wave floods that decimated Indonesia in December of 2004. With extraordinary sympathy, Community eventually collected more than \$14,000 for that crisis alone. Great, generous sympathy. Some may call this pity, but the

better word for this kind of sympathy is mercy.

II. Have Mercy - Empathy

The next time I recall hearing the phrase “Have mercy” was in California, on an election day, in the living room of Mary Reynolds’ home on E. 22nd Place, in south central Los Angeles. We were feasting on the best pinto beans and homemade cornbread I’d ever put in my mouth. But even more delicious was the taste of democracy in the air that day, as vibrant older folks working the polls told of the battles fought and the victories won to ensure that all people could vote. Then in came Mr. Soto. “Hey Mr. Soto!” the ladies shouted. “It’s Mr. Soto, ya’ll!”

Mr. Soto was an immigrant. He had become a naturalized citizen and a favorite in the neighborhood. That day he was more than a little worried because he couldn’t find his voter registration card, and he wanted to vote. When the ladies holding forth at the registration table heard his tale, one of them said “Have mercy, ya’ll! Mr. Soto’s in a fix, and we’ve got to help him.” Then they reassured him that they would walk him through the process for confirmation of his registration and that he would indeed be able to vote that day. And he did.

There it was again: “Have mercy, ya’ll!” This was an invitation to empathy. Beyond feelings of sympathy, it was a word urging others to conjoin their lives with Mr. Soto’s so that he wouldn’t have to bear his burden alone. “Have mercy, ya’ll!” Empathy. Yes, in addition to sympathy, empathy is surely what mercy means.

III. Have Mercy - As A Petition for Healing and Forgiveness

More recently I heard the phrase “Have mercy” while on a spiritual retreat in Tucson with the other members of the leadership circle of the Bethany Fellowships.

On a calm and balmy Thursday afternoon, we found ourselves away from the retreat site and in the parking lot of a Safeway shopping center. We were there to pray. We read two brief pieces of scripture – “And a voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because

they were no more"⁴ and "Comfort, comfort my people says your God, speak tenderly to Jerusalem...."⁵

Then we read the names of the six people who died on the day of horrors, January 8, 2011, and offered our prayers of anguish and love. It was a somber moment to repeat the names of Phyllis Schneck (79, a homemaker from Tucson), Dorothy "Dot" Morris (76, a retired secretary), John Roll (63, chief judge of the U.S. District Court for Arizona, named to the federal bench by President George H. W. Bush in 1991), Dorwan Stoddard (76, a retired construction worker), and Gabriel "Gabe" Zimmerman (30, a community outreach director for Rep. Gabrielle Giffords), and Christina-Taylor Green (age 9).

We also prayed for the thirteen wounded and maimed. We prayed that their memories of that day would be transformed into dreams of different and new days, as family members and friends and their communities of faith would gather round them with comfort and tenderness.

And we prayed for Jared Lee Loughner, the broken young man, who expressed tragically less than the image of God in which he was created and committed horrendous crimes of murder and mayhem. We prayed for clarity in his soul and "a recognition and acknowledgment and somehow, someday, a healing" in God's time and by God's heart of grace. When we concluded that part of the prayer, someone was inspired to say, "And we pray for his parents, too."

We prayed as well for the people who minister in Tucson, that they might possess "grace and grit enough to continue to provide the light of hope even when the darkness seems daunting," and to remind Tucson of the meaning of its name - "that it may abide as the place where 'the water at the foot of black mountain' - the waters of care and consolation, the waters of the river of life - are offered to one and all." What we were doing had a haunting harmony with those other occasions I had heard "Have mercy." Only this time, it was a simple request for healing and forgiveness: "Have mercy on Tucson, O God." It was a petition for a healing of the people who had suffered loss and for a merciful forgiveness for the one who had caused such senseless

loss.

Our simple time of prayer in that parking lot on that plain Thursday afternoon reminded me of the ancient refrains of the church's earliest liturgies: "*Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison.*" (Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy.) Those would have been words enough, even if we had not had a litany to read. Kyrie Eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison. Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy. Have mercy. Heal and forgive.

George Buttrick once offered wise and poetic guidance: "*If no deed is possible, words have power.... If no words are possible, tears have saving grace.*"⁶

That afternoon our words were all we had. But they easily could have been summed up with the simple phrase "Have mercy." And if words had failed us that day, our tears would have sufficed. They too would have been expressing "Have mercy."

Have mercy - as sympathy, as empathy, as a plea for healing and forgiveness. Yes, each one is what mercy is about.

IV. Have Mercy - As Moral Imperative

One of the most memorable occasions of hearing "Have mercy" was during a spate when I lived across the street from All Peoples Christian Church in Los Angeles. Not only were the people and the place memorable nearly beyond belief. So were the DJ's who prevailed on the radio at that time. With great voices and distinctive styles, they guided us in the procurement of the music which our souls needed. One DJ had a signature way of greeting his listening audience and turning our attention to the next tune he was about to play. "*Have mercy, Los Angeles!*" he'd shout with commanding volume and compelling flair.

"*Have mercy, Los Angeles!*" With that signature announcement the DJ was not only alerting us to pay attention to the next tune he was playing. He was also beseeching us to assume a shared moral duty of taking care of one another. To use Shane Stanford's phrase, he was urging us to take note and see that "*Mercy is spiritual*

glue.”⁷ He was also stating what Eugene Peterson has noted about mercy: “You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.”⁸

Have mercy, as a moral imperative, for all people to seek out the best possible outcomes for one another.

Have mercy, as an existential urging, for one and all to abide by the exercise of mercy, to know that we are called to be “a community of practical and active mercy....,”⁹ that we are to regard mercy as “something to be done.”¹⁰

As Barbara Brown Taylor put it so eloquently in her very first literary offering, *Mixed Blessings*: “You are loved, act like it. You are redeemed, act like it.”¹¹

This is what the Jamaica Partners Medical Mission folks have done. Just four weeks ago we bid the 25 mission trip Partners farewell with a blessing in worship. They returned ten days later to tell us that at one station they saw 89 patients the very first day they were there. Then, the next day, 114 more! There was, Gayle Woods reported, greater need by the Jamaicans this year than on any previous visit of the Partners in the past. The Jamaican Partners Medical Mission offered mercy just as they have received it. And in turn, they received even more mercy. They were, even if only for a short time, part of “a community of practical and active mercy.”

“Have Mercy, Kansas City!”

“Have mercy.” Two little words that pack a wallop. Have sympathy. Have empathy. Have a posture and an attitude of forgiveness and healing. Be sure always to share the mercy that you have received. “Have mercy!”

What if we were to hear that phrase with fresh ears and then begin to practice what we hear? “Have mercy!”

What if we were to say that phrase with new appreciation for its many nuances? “Have mercy!”

What if, just what if, we were to go around and say “Have mercy!” to everyone everywhere? “Have mercy, Lenexa!” and “Have mercy, Liberty!” and “Have mercy, Leawood!” And “Have mercy, Kansas City!”

What if we were the new DJs providing the stimulus to listeners throughout the metropolitan area with just the right emphasis about mercy? It just might be the start of a revolution of caring and sharing and love unlike nearly anything we've ever seen! "Have mercy!" "Have mercy!" "Have mercy!" AMEN.

NOTES

- 1 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiC_9RHTvsA
- 2 John 18:37.
- 3 Luke 23:34.
- 4 Matthew 2:18
- 5 Isaiah 40:1-2.
- 6 *The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951), p. 284.
- 7 Shane Stanford, *The Eight Blessings: Rediscovering the Beatitudes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), p. 80.
- 8 Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NAVPRESS), p. 1250.
- 9 Warren Carter, *Matthew and The Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (New York: Orbis Books), p. 134.
- 10 Douglas H. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), p. 40.
- 11 Barbara Brown Taylor, *Mixed Blessings* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1986, 1998), p. 83.