



## *“Have Mercy”*

Matthew 5:7

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Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

His name was Bartimaeus and he was blind. That meant he had to beg in order to live. Some of his neighbors assumed he was blind because he or his parents had sinned. All his neighbors believed his blindness rendered him “unclean.” That meant he was untouchable.

Bartimaeus was an object of pity for some, scorn for others. He lived on the outer margin of polite society – literally. He begged for money by the side of the road on the outskirts of Jericho. Invisible to the residents of town – he was just part of life in Jericho – he relied on the generosity of religious pilgrims who passed through Jericho on the way to Jerusalem for feasts. Tourists tended to be more generous on their way to visit the Holy City and do business with God.

Jesus and his followers were on the road to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Like most pilgrims, they stayed overnight in Jericho and the next day planned to hike up “The Jericho Road,” a long day’s march up into the mountains to Jerusalem.

As they left Jericho that morning they had a long day’s journey ahead of them and large matters on their minds. The great feast awaited them, and the Temple in its holy glory beckoned them to hurry up the road.

Bartimaeus heard the pilgrim band approaching and discerned that Jesus of Nazareth was with them. He’d heard about Jesus and maybe, just maybe, he’d have mercy on a poor blind man.

He shouted, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Jesus’ disciples, desiring to manage their own and Jesus’ time and energy, shouted back, “Keep quiet. Don’t disturb the Master.” They wanted him to stay invisible and out of their way.

Bartimaeus shouted even louder, “Jesus, have mercy on me.”

Jesus stopped and stood still. He looked over and saw, really saw, the blind beggar by the road. Jesus called out, “Come over here.”

Suddenly, maybe for the first time in his life, Bartimaeus was given dignity as Jesus summoned him to the center of his attention. He was about to receive a gift far larger than charity and spare change. He was entering the circle of God’s mercy.

“What do you want, my son?” Jesus asked. “I want to see,” Bartimaeus replied. And Jesus healed him.

The cry of blind Bartimaeus, “Lord, have mercy,” lies at the center of the historic Christian church. For centuries the Christians have sung and chanted an ancient hymn called the *Kyrie Eleison*. It means “Lord, have mercy.”

That cry lies just as deep in the human spirit. All of us, hanging at the end of one rope or another, have run out of words except to cry, “God, have mercy.” I know I have. Our cry joins the cry of humanity. All of us join Bartimaeus as beggars in need of mercy.

The fifth beatitude is about mercy, “Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.” This beatitude is linked to Jesus’ teaching about forgiveness. Both mercy and forgiveness are experiences that when received must be given away. “Forgive us our sins as we forgive...” is the way the Lord’s Prayer puts it. The same dynamic applies in the beatitude, “Be merciful and you will receive mercy.” In both mercy and forgiveness giving and receiving are bound together.

Later in Matthew, in another sermon on relationships in the new community, Jesus shows how mercy and forgiveness work. The basis of relationships in the new community is a radical new self-awareness. Jesus put a child in the middle of his disciples and told them that living in the kingdom of God begins by adopting specific character traits seen in children. Children are dependent and they know it. So are we, but often we deny it. In fact, the first beatitude is all about being dependent on each other and God. Children also possess a refreshing lack of pretense. Congregations work best when we are mutually dependent and leave our resumes at the door.

That being said, Jesus goes on, keep accounts short in the community. Live in reconciled relationships – always. When someone offends you, tell them – gently, but firmly. And if they are in the right frame of mind, they will ask for forgiveness. Grant it freely.

If the person is resistant to reconciliation, ask for help. Take a friend from the community with you and attempt reconciliation again. If that doesn’t work, make it a community-wide issue. Living reconciled and in peace is that important. Living reconciled and peacefully requires lots of forgiveness and mercy.

Peter, speaking as usual for all of us, posed a question to Jesus. “How many times do I have to forgive a brother or sister who asks for forgiveness, seven times?” The conventional wisdom of the time said three times was enough, four was the limit, then withdraw your mercy.

“No, Peter,” Jesus said. “You missed the point entirely. Not seven times but seventy times seven.” In other words, don’t count the times you forgive. Rather develop a disposition that tends toward mercy and forgiveness. Be a merciful person. Be a forgiving community. That’s the point. Jesus is offering a new way of being in the world.

You may remember a psychological inventory popular a few years ago called the Taylor-Johnson Temperament Analysis. The instrument attempted to describe the character of a person. The first question was simple, direct and telling, “Are you a forgiving person?”

I recall reading that question and asking myself, I think for the first time, “Am I a forgiving person?” Not “do I forgive,” but “am I forgiving?” That’s Jesus’ point. The new community will be made up of merciful and forgiving people who form an alternative culture in an unforgiving world.

Jesus then told a story to drive home his point. A king had a debtor who owed him several million dollars. He hit on hard times and could not repay the debt. The king threatened him with legal action if he did not pay back what he owed. He had to repay or go to prison, which would reduce his family to poverty.

All the debtor could do was beg the king to forgive the debt. To his astonishment, the king forgave the debt. He didn’t have to. He just did for no reason save his disposition to be merciful.

Immediately, the forgiven debtor went to a man who owed him one hundred dollars and demanded repayment. Like the first debtor, this man could not repay his smaller debt. The forgiven debtor grabbed him, choked him, and had him thrown in prison.

What is wrong with this picture? One who receives mercy should be changed by the experience and gladly give mercy. Jesus finishes by declaring that in the new community, we will gladly forgive one another – from the heart – for no reason except a new disposition to offer mercy.

In mercy and in forgiveness, receiving is bound up with giving. It is in the nature of mercy and forgiveness to produce mercy and forgiveness. In mercy and forgiveness, failure to give mercy indicates we do not understand mercy – and, in fact, have not received it.

To put it another way, if we understood the magnitude of the mercy we have received from God, we would be much more inclined to extend mercy and forgiveness to each other.

The mercy of God is central to God’s essential character in the Bible. You might remember the story about Israel at Mt. Sinai. Moses was up on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments while the people down below were making a golden calf, a fertility god. To put it bluntly, they were having a drunken orgy.

Moses came down carrying the Commandments on stone tablets. When he saw what was going on, he threw the tablets down and the tablets shattered. Well, God was displeased too. When Moses calmed down, he reminded God of God’s covenant promise to Abraham, Sarah and their descendents. God swore that come what may, God would protect, prosper and love Israel. And God forgave them.

Then Moses makes a confession of faith repeated several times in the Old Testament. It’s a confession about God’s essential character (Exodus 34:6ff):

The Lord, the Lord, is a merciful and gracious God,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

It appears that the regulating principle of God’s relationship with the creation is mercy that forgives. It is God’s disposition to extend mercy which, of course, means limitless acts of mercy for those who ask. It gets better: God takes the initiative and, in fact,

pursues us, offering forgiving mercy. Finally, God makes the ultimate sacrifice, the death of God's own son, which mysteriously and wonderfully, provides infinite forgiveness for all. And God does all this for no good reason except it is in God's nature to be merciful.

An ethical imperative flows from God's merciful forgiveness. Throughout Scripture, we are called to be like God. Being like God begins with our essential character. The incomprehensible mercy from God creates a merciful disposition in us who have received it.

The ethical motivation for Christians is not some vague moralizing humanizing: be nice to people because the world would be a better place if we did. Rather, the transforming power of the Christian ethic flows from the character and behavior of God. We are merciful and have mercy because we know a merciful God and have experienced God's boundless mercy.

In the Old Testament, God instructs Israel to be merciful to slaves – because when they were slaves, God had mercy on them. God calls Israel to liberate the oppressed because God liberated them. "Take care of the aliens among you," God says, "because when you were aliens, I cared for you." There's something about God's mercy that creates mercy in those who receive it.

In the New Testament, Paul is always concerned that Christians behave appropriately. Paul's ethic always flows from his theology. Over and over he writes, "I beg you, implore you, beseech you, live in a manner worthy of your name." The motivation? "Because of the mercies of God," that's why (Romans 12:1).

The good news I bring you today is this: mercy, both the disposition and the activity, is a gift given to all who ask. Jesus put it quite simply, "Ask and you will receive...." The issue is whether we want to be transformed by the power of God.

Dr. Krister Sairsingh was one of my friends when we lived in Boston. At the time he was Assistant Minister at Memorial Church in Harvard University. Krister is a brilliant scholar and like many brilliant people, a bit scattered.

Krister earned his Ph.D. at Harvard under the supervision of R.R. Niebuhr, a demanding and stern scholar. Besides being a bit scattered, English is Krister's second language and he had to work to support his family. He had a difficult time making the writing deadlines for his dissertation. In fact, he missed them all.

After the last deadline passed, Krister finished his dissertation and took it to Professor Niebuhr. Niebuhr refused to accept it. Never in the history of the department had a dissertation been accepted after the last deadline passed.

Krister tried every persuasive technique he knew. Niebuhr said no to them all. Krister finally gave up. Crushed beyond words (after all, this was his entire life being rejected), he stood to leave the room.

As he got to the door, he turned to Professor Niebuhr and said, "Is there no mercy here?"

Niebuhr paused for a long time and finally said, "OK. Just this once. Just for you."

**Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims**  
**Sermon 10/21/07**

Now Dr. Niebuhr boasts that Krister's dissertation on Jonathan Edwards is the best work on Edwards in the last century. All because of an act of mercy.

It may not surprise you to learn that Krister left the security of a life at Harvard to become a Professor of Christianity at Moscow State University in Russia. He is paid next to nothing. It's dangerous in Moscow. He's been mugged. But Krister loves the challenge teaching in an often atheistic environment. He thinks he is offering something they will receive in no other way. He's right, and I suspect he will never leave.

There is something about mercy, received and understood, that creates both a merciful disposition and a life of merciful acts. That should not surprise anyone who knows God.  
Amen.

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