



Lord, Have Mercy
 Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; October 26, 2025
 19th Sunday after Pentecost
 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 8:9-14

A few years ago, a novel penned by Joanne Harris was made into a movie. The cast of “Chocolat” included such names as Johnny Depp and Judy Dench. Set in 1959, the movie begins *once upon a time* in a little French village known for its tranquility—that is until a sly north wind blows in Vianne, played by Juliett Binoche. Vianne is about to do the unthinkable—open a chocolate shop across from the Catholic church during the season of Lent. The town is run by Comte de Reynaud, whose family has ruled the village down through the ages. Comte de Reynaud is the mayor, and the self-appointed moral authority of the land, who thinks so highly of himself, he has the audacity to write the sermons that young Father Henri delivers like a reluctant puppet on a string.

It’s no surprise that Reynaud isn’t amused by Vianne’s sweet temptations—nor does he appreciate her generous, compassionate nature that attracts people to her almost as quickly as

her sweet confectionary treats. When Reynaud looks at Vianne, he sees an adversary—a woman who’s leading his people astray.

At first it seems odd that the people follow Reynaud’s lead without question. Eventually, though, it’s clear that they aren’t evil—they’re just living unexamined lives, like tranquil sleepwalkers following the path of least resistance—that is until they wake up and smell the coffee, or in this case, the chocolate. In time Reynaud’s arrogance and anger get the best of him, and his reckless words influence a troubled man of the village to set a dangerous fire. When Reynaud realizes what he’s done, he’s brought to his knees—an act that starts him on his way toward a transformed heart—opened by love—touched by grace—shaped by mercy—and bent toward compassion.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is again teaching through use of a parable. But this time he isn’t targeting his disciples or the crowds that are gathered. Instead, Jesus is bent on opening the eyes, and perhaps the hearts, of some who pride themselves in their righteousness while looking down on others with contempt. We read the parable, and its meaning is crystal clear. If we want to follow the right path, we’ll align ourselves with the humble tax collector. But, as is usually the case, whenever Jesus’ teaching *seems* crystal clear, it’s reason to pause and ponder.

So, let’s examine the text more closely, beginning with the Pharisee. Going up to the temple, he stands by himself, and prays ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ It’s interesting to note that the Pharisee *stands by himself*—not with the community. Also notice how many times the Pharisee says, “I.” I thank you...I am not like others...I fast...I give...His prayer is all about himself. It sounds as if he’s come to the temple to remind God just how fortunate God is to have him worshipping at all!

But let’s give the fellow his due. Likely he does lead a blameless life according to the law and is seen by others as a religious expert. He gives 10% of his income to the Lord and fasts twice a week. Dedicated to his faith, generous—surely, we would love to have him as a member of First Presbyterian Church, wouldn’t we?

What, then, is his fault? First, while the Pharisee may be right about the kind of life he’s living, he’s confused about the source of that life. He is confused about God’s grace. Second, he fails to show compassion for others. So, while he prays to God, his prayer concerns himself. He misses the source of his blessing, and he misses the opportunity to be a blessing. In the end, the Pharisee leaves the temple with a heart just as empty as it was when he came through the doors.

What about the tax collector? He, too, goes to the temple to pray. Standing far off, he doesn’t even look up to heaven when he says, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ He approaches God with

an entirely different demeanor. But even here, in Luke's telling, Jesus messes with our expectations because we expect the tax collector to promise to make amends—promise to give his own 10%—promise something. Make no mistake, the tax collector is not painted as a nice guy. His very profession defines him as a wealthy, low life who makes a living by collecting taxes for Rome, and it's presumed, extorting profit for himself. There's no doubt that the sins of the tax collector are real. And even though he enters the temple to pray, he doesn't pledge to leave his employment or make restitution. He doesn't even promise he'll try to do better tomorrow. But what he does is open his mouth and speak words that reveal his heart. Somehow, somehow, he recognizes his dependence on God. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" The tax collector knows the one thing the Pharisee does not: Above all else, he needs God's mercy and grace.

When it comes to mercy though, let's be honest: It's in our human nature to want mercy for ourselves and justice for others, isn't it? "Now wait a minute," you might say. "I'm a good Christian. I am committed to Jesus and to this faith community. I give of my time by attending worship regularly. I give of my talents by participating in our music program and serving on a committee. I give generously of my income to support God's work—here and in the world." That's a wonderful testimony, for sure. But Jesus, I believe, would ask one question, "How is your heart?" For being committed to the ways of God is a matter of the heart. As Christians, we can tithe, we can fast, we can be Spiritual Masters, but we can still fail to be faithful.

Faithfulness isn't measured by flawless performance or perfect devotion. Faithfulness is measured by humility and trust. The tax collector reminds us that the truest prayer is not, "Look what I have done for you, God," but rather, "Have mercy upon me." His words invite us to rest in the mercy that holds us, shapes us, and sends us out again to love the world God so loves. And that same mercy carries us through the whole of life—from the first halting prayers of faith to the final lap of the journey.

We hear this truth echoed in the words of the Apostle Paul near the end of his life. Writing to his beloved Timothy, he says, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." It sounds triumphant, and in a way it is. But Paul's confidence is not in himself. Paul goes on to describe a time when no one came to his defense—no one, that is, except the Lord. In his words: "But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength...The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom."

There it is again—the deep awareness of our dependence on God. Like the tax collector, Paul stands not on his own merit, but on God's mercy. His strength, his courage, his endurance—all are gifts from the One who has never left his side. The Pharisee trusted in his own righteousness; the tax collector trusted in God's compassion; Paul trusted in the Lord who stood by him through every storm. And maybe that's what faithfulness looks like in the end—not pride in what we've

done for God, but peace in what God has done for us. A heart humble enough to pray for mercy, and brave enough to keep running the race, knowing that grace will meet us at the finish line.

We catch a glimpse of this in the character of Comte de Reynaud—brought low by his own pride, undone by grace, transformed by mercy. His story reminds us that change always begins in that same humble place where the tax collector prayed and where Paul stood—in the presence of the God who will not give up on us.

In the end, both the tax collector and Paul show us what it means to live by grace. One stands in the temple, empty-handed and pleading for mercy; the other stands near the finish line, worn but steadfast, giving thanks to the God who has never left his side. Between them stretches the whole journey of faith—from confession to completion, from “God, be merciful to me” to “The Lord stood by me.” And that, perhaps, is the heart of discipleship: to begin and end, and begin again, in mercy. For it is mercy that humbles us, grace that sustains us, and love that will, at last, bring us safely home. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ *Feasting on the Word*, E. Elizabeth, Johnson, 215.

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