

On Mercy

Sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

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My beloved partner Kate is mild-mannered, meditative ... and a sports fan. I am also a sports fan, having been raised in a rabidly enthusiastic sports family so when in the early part of our relationship we settle in together to watch Monday Night Football I am happy to do so. We are rooting for Kate's 49ers and they are dominating. But it doesn't take long for me to do what I always do: I begin to feel sorry for the losing team. About the quarterback I say, "Geez. The poor guy." and I utter other expressions that Kate interprets as sympathetic. She is quick to respond. I am banished – *banished* – from the room, Kate shouting after me, "NO MERCY! YOU ARE TO SHOW NO MERCY!!!!"

I don't think that the Biblical prophet Micah could have foreseen a modern sports fan's ferocity when it was written:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does God require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8

This verse is called a "perfect summary of the prophetic teaching on true religion" (Harper Collins Study Bible) "To do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God."

Considering world events over the past week, we can certainly do with more people walking humbly with their God – in all the names that God known and named. The recent violence unleashed in God's name perverts the "perfect summary of the prophetic teaching on true religion" and is precisely what gives religion a bad name in more secular quarters. As violence spread throughout the Middle East ... as politicians jumped on the bandwagon here in the United States ... humility was utterly lacking let alone the love of justice and mercy. Indeed, the implicit message was, "No mercy! You are to show no mercy!" But the stakes are much higher than those of a Monday night football game.

And we must remind ourselves: these actions were not those of the majority. The Council of American and Islamic Relations held a press conference the day after the attacks in Libya condemning the violence in no uncertain terms. On the same day Libyans held signs written in English indicating that not all Libyans supported such violence.

Nor do all Christians hold the views of a certain movie producer who spews bigotry and ignorance.

And still, we mourn the actions of the few who are moved to violence and who by doing so betray the true tenants of religious life: to do justice, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with their God.

The difference between mercy and forgiveness is subtle but important. Books are written on this subtle difference, many of them legalistic in nature and placed within the context of justice. One philosopher wrote that “Mercy, unlike pardon and forgiveness, is an exercise of equity, which is an application of justice in light of the unique circumstances in individual cases.” (Paul M. Hughes. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*)

A Jewish perspective offers this description of mercy: “Even G-d prays. What is His prayer? May it be My will that My love of compassion overwhelm my demand for strict justice.” (Mahzor for Yom Kippur – Rabbinical Assembly of New York)

And this third perspective comes from the stage. One of the most poetic descriptions of mercy comes from Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*. It is a courtroom scene during which Shylock, the antagonist, demands the pound of flesh his bond had promised should Antonio default on Shylock’s loan. Portia asks Shylock to be merciful and Shylock asks why. She responds:

The quality of mercy is not strained;
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.
Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptered sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest God’s
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, ...
Though justice be thy plea, consider this:
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation. (Act IV)

Of course, her description is as ironic as it is poetic because in the end Portia and the other cast of characters is anything but merciful to Shylock. And yet, what a description of mercy does Shakespeare offer to the ages. Hold this description in your heart as you imagine this.

You have been wronged. *Badly wronged*. So wronged that you are determined that justice be served. But the justice you imagine looks more like vengeance – a justice void of compassion. Anger and righteousness fans the fire now burning in your soul. You imagine that justice is the cool water that will put it out.

But from that same place within there is a full and luminous echo that's making you twitch. Its music is sweet and it says:

- "In the course of justice, none of us should see salvation."
- It says, "May your love of compassion overwhelm your demand for strict justice."
- It says, "Do justice, ... love mercy and ... walk humbly with your God."

Yes. Justice is necessary. But we must exact justice with compassion. With a sense of equity based on the situation. With kindness. With mercy – in some Biblical translations, mercy is the same as kindness.

"Why?" you may ask. Because isn't this who we would like to be: compassionate, kind, forgiving and yes, merciful ... even when we are challenged within an inch of our goodness?

Tonight at sundown begins Rosh Hashanah, the start of a New Year. 5773 This High Holiday is followed by Yom Kippur a time when individuals atone together in community and ask for G-d's mercy and forgiveness. We honor these holidays each year as they bring not only to our Jewish brothers and sisters but to all the world the greatest themes of religious life: humility, justice, and mercy. We strive to be the embodiment of these qualities. In doing so, we express mercy and forgiveness for our own transgressions – at times the most challenging act of both. And we forgive others as we begin again in love.

L'shanah Tova! A sweet New Year to you, Friends.

Shalom. Amen.