

God's Mercy For the Asking

From the series: Images of God in the Stories of Jesus

Text: Psalm 130:3-4; Luke 18:13-14

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Pentecost XII, August 30, 1992

Transcription of the spoken sermon

If you, O Lord, should mark inequities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. Psalm 130: 3-4

God, be merciful to me, a sinner! I tell you this man went down to his hour justified All who humble themselves will be exalted. Luke 18:13-14

There is more mercy in God than sin in us! There is more mercy in God than there is sin in us! I think I will have you say it with me: *There is more mercy in God than sin in us!* End of the sermon. Let's receive the offering and go home. (Charlie, that was not the time to applaud.) O.K. *I'll say amen* .

If I could send you home this morning with that thought indelibly written on your psyche, imprinted deep into the depths of your being, it would be worth the offering. It would not be a Sunday morning spent in vain. There is more mercy in God than there is sin in us. I hope that doesn't disappoint you. That happens to be a favorite statement of one of my favorite preachers. It is true and it is Good News, and it is something that ought to set our feet to dancing. It is something, I'm afraid, that has not come through clearly enough often enough. We talk about Gospel, which means Good News. That is the message of the church. I am sorry that the church has been identified by so many, though perhaps justifiably so, as a place not of good news but a place of bad news, a place of gloom and doom, of a kind of repent or perish syndrome that casts a shroud over the human experience. For as a matter of fact the truth of the Gospel is that there is more mercy in God than sin in us and, therefore, we are invited to place our hope in God - not in our past achievements, not in our future prospects, but in God. Our hope alone can be in God.

Psalm 130, a poignant prayer, a scream, a primal scream from the depths: "Lord hear my cry," is a straightforward statement full of candor about one person's experience of the human condition. "Oh Lord, if you should track my record, I wouldn't have a leg to stand on." Or, in more biblical nuance, "Lord, if thou should mark iniquity, Lord, who could stand?" But then we read an expression of

the faith of Israel at its very best: "But with thee there is forgiveness." Doesn't that move you? Oh there are many times, I know, when one can hear that and not be moved by it because one's existential situation at the time has not overwhelmed one with one's own flawed, frail, human situation, but there are times . . . Aren't there times? Have you had times when the words of a Psalmist were music to your ears and gave you just the words you needed from the heart to say, "Oh Lord, out of the depths I cry to you. Lord, hear my cry. Oh Lord, if you should mark iniquities who could stand?" But there is forgiveness for you. The Psalmist believed that there was more mercy in God than there was sin in him and, therefore, despairing of himself, he trusted God.

But not all in Israel followed in his example and took him as a model. There were those in the days of Jesus who trusted in themselves, believed that they were righteous, and despised others. Those two things often go together. Trust yourself that you are righteous and check yourself. Very often the other side of the coin is the despising of others, a contempt for other humankind. But Jesus, in order to crack that armor, in order to break through to those who trusted in themselves, told this parable, a parable of the Publican and the Pharisee. The parable is very familiar. Just a brief little vignette that makes a powerful point that there are really only two kinds of people in the world - those who go it alone and those who trust in God. So the Pharisee came into the temple and began to pray a prayer of thanksgiving to be sure, but really a prayer of praise of his own virtue, reminding God of all the good things that the Pharisee had done.

Now, as I have said in these last two or three weeks, the Pharisees do get a bum rap in the New Testament. They get a bum rap because they were the over/against people. They were the critics of Jesus. They were the established religious authorities who were being threatened by what Jesus was proclaiming, but they were good people. They were the best people in town. I don't put much stock by their fasting, but I certainly do like the fact that they tithed! Christ Community could use a few Pharisees in its midst! I would put up with your supercilious righteousness if I could get your money! (laughter) They were good people. The things that the Pharisee recited about himself were true things, and he was a good man, and the last thing in the world that I would want you to do would be to go out of here and say, "Thank God, I am not like that Pharisee."

On the other hand there was a Publican. A tax collector. Not such a good person. Religiously, he was unclean because he had dealings with the Gentile Roman authorities. Therefore, he was ceremonially judged unclean. He was despised by his own people because he was a collaborator with the enemy. He sold his soul for a buck. In that cruel and corrupt tax system, he collected the money for the Roman oppressor, oppressing his own flesh and blood. He was not a good person. But the point of the parable, as Jesus juxtaposes the Pharisee and the Publican, is not to say that there are good people and bad people – really, good people and people not quite so good – the point is not to distinguish two kinds of people. The point of the parable is to distinguish two kinds of spirit, two kinds of attitude, two

kinds of approach to God. As far as Jesus was concerned, this was not an issue of whether the Pharisee was pretty good and the Publican not so good, but the fact that the Pharisee, in all of his virtue, was running on his own record and finally trusting himself. The performance principle was his game. And the Publican, despairing of himself, cast himself on the mercy of God. Jesus says the Pharisee went out still garbed in his own virtue, and the Publican went out garbed in grace.

Now we could well spend some time on these two people, but that's not the purpose of the messages in this series. Rather, I am treating the stories obliquely because I want to ask the question now: What is the image of God in that story of Jesus? It is probably not as obvious as in some of the stories that Jesus told, but I think that you would agree with me that behind this story was Jesus understanding of God, the God Jesus knew, the God that Jesus proclaimed. Would you agree that the image of God in the story of Jesus is an image of God who likes people? Or, if that's too bland, a God who loves people as human beings? A God who accepts us in our humanness and affirms that humanness? It seems to me that's the image of God behind this story told by Jesus. Jesus is not saying there are good people and bad people, and God loves good people and doesn't like bad people. Jesus was saying, God loves human beings. God loves people. God loves people in all of the contradictoriness of their human existence. And the only thing that God is looking for is an openness to God's mercy, that resting in God rather than oneself.

A preacher had a class of children before him, Ernie Kurtz says in his recent book. He said to the children, "If all bad people were red and all good people were green, what color would you be?" Little Linda Jean thought mightily for a moment and then her face broke into a great smile. She said, "I know! I would be streaky." An answer far beyond the question. The wisdom of a child who knew that, if she were forced to put herself in the camp of the good or the bad, she couldn't fit in either place because she was a combination of both. And is that not precisely our human condition? Are we not beast and angel? Are we not light and shadow? Are we not full of turbulence longing for serenity? Torn apart looking for wholeness? In your bulletin there is a paragraph from Carlyle Marney, who describes the human condition vividly and poignantly. It pictures the propensity to evil that rests in us all.

I was reminded of this last week when I heard the zookeeper of the Miami Zoo interviewed. They said to him, "We hear there are dangerous animals on the loose in the wake of the hurricane." And he answered, "Well, they are not dangerous, unless they get cornered or become afraid. Then they are dangerous." And isn't that true of us as well? Aren't we for the most part civil and decent folks? Aren't we for the most part people who could identify with those wonderful deeds of compassion and kindness that come to expression in a crisis like Hurricane Andrew, where neighbors become neighborly? Is there not the milk of human kindness in us all? But are we not at our best when we are responding to that? Are we not capable of glory and gore? Scare us, get us in a corner, elicit our

defensiveness, put us under threat, accuse us, condemn us - the hair bristles on the back of our neck and, if necessary, we will kill. Are we evil? I don't think so. But we are capable of every evil deed the world has ever known. Are we not a common lot of those who go through life fractured - fragile - afraid? Most of us at our worst are simply scared to death. We are not evil, but we do evil things. We are not destroyers, but we live with self-destructiveness. At heart we are lovers, but we can become lions in the den.

Ernie Kurtz, who I mentioned a moment ago, wrote a book whose title is worth the price of the book. It is entitled *The Spirituality of Imperfection*. Ernie Kurtz was here last year and will be back here in October. He has written a definitive study of the history of AA and its philosophical and theological roots. And he has done a lot of research into the history of the wisdom literature of the peoples of the world, and has wonderful stories that he has gathered together in this book *The Spirituality of Imperfection*. The lesson that the AA community has to teach the Church, just as the Church at one time taught the AA community. In the last few decades with the membership of the church going down, the membership of AA has gone up and that is not because there are so many more people recovering from alcoholism or substance abuse. It is because there are so many more broken human beings out there who have found in that fellowship what they have not found in the church - an acceptance of the fact that they are human.

Are you human? You smile, you blush, you say, "Oh, yes, I'm human - all too human." All too human? No. Just human. To be candid, that's all we are! And I would suggest to you that's what God intends us to be. I love Psalm 103. "As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him." God remembers our frame. God knows our frame; God remembers that we are dust. God knows us. God knows what we are. And God has mercy upon us. In the wisdom of the Creator we were not created robots on a string. We were not created machines that could be turned with a crank and just go on our way perfectly. We are people full of contradictoriness. Torn apart. You want another good word like *murmur*? Think of the German word *zerissenheit*. William James, the philosopher, translated that word as *torn-to-pieceshood*.

Can you identify with that? Have you ever felt torn in a dozen directions? Have you ever felt fractured? Have you ever felt that your whole being was coming apart? Have you ever looked up in despair - to the heavens and said, "I simply don't have it all together."

Well, join the human race. God made you that way. "But," you say, "isn't that a bit too simple?" Well is it really? God loves us as human beings. Struggling. Persons in process. And in our freedom and responsibility we are capable of grandeur and groveling. That's who we are. And the reason people are finding healing in the AA community is because there they are finding an honest admission,

acknowledgement, ownership of the human condition. And that admission means that one needs God, along with all the mercy that God has to give. In his book, Kurtz makes a claim that seems to be my own experience as well that, in response to the modern age of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Church has moved toward perfectionism. Not an acceptance of the contradictions of our being, but a push always to perfection.

I was schooled in WORM theology. That is, “such a worm as I.” And I think, probably, to denigrate the human person in that way is as wrong as to exalt the human person as did the Pharisee. My preaching is skewed because I’m screwed up, and so you have to filter everything through that recognition. A person only talks about what *they* need to talk about for their own survival. That’s why I always talk about Grace and Mercy. I could sum up my impression in the center of my being about what I am about and what God calls me to be in the little poem that was written by my fourth grade teacher in the book of autographs at the end of the school year: “Good, better, best. Never let it rest. Until the good is better and the better is best.” Never enough! We drive ourselves with a compulsion we don’t understand and feel we always come up short because in the Church we’ve not been honest with the ambiguity of the human situation, which is simply the way we are. Created in the image God. Part of the earth and part of God.

Well, modern culture in reaction doesn’t help. Some years ago Tom Harris wrote a book, a best seller, *I’m O.K. You’re O.K.* Remember it? Over against the denigration of the human person on the one hand, that did help to bring some people back to a self-worth and self-esteem, but that’s not true either. I’m not O.K. And you’re not O.K. Forgive me for saying so. I’m not O.K. You’re not O.K., but *that’s* O.K. God can handle that. If only we can come to the point of acknowledging that. An analyst quoted by Kurtz, named Marian Woodman, says, “Addiction keeps a person in touch with God.” At the very point of vulnerability is where the surrender takes place. That is where God enters. God comes through the wound. The Pharisee was regaled in an armor that mercy could not penetrate - he was going it alone. The Publican had no armor, and the point of vulnerability - his wound - was the crack through which grace could enter. “Out of the depths I cry to thee, Oh Lord. Oh Lord, hear my cry. If thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquity, I haven’t got a leg to stand on. But with thee there is forgiveness. God, be merciful to me a sinner.” And God is, thank God.

One of the great Christian leaders of this century, a theologian and preacher, Carlyle Marney, wrote the following in his book, *The Human Condition*:

“Man is the most dangerous and savage of the beasts: His bite is poisonous; his hand is a club; his foot is a weapon; knives, clubs, spears are projectiles to bear his hostility. Nothing in nature is so well equipped for hating or hurting. Confuse him and he may lash out at everything. Crowd him and he kills, robs, destroys, for his crime rate increases in proportion to his crowding. Deprive him and he retaliates. Impoverish him

and he burns villas in the night. Enslave him and he revolts. Pamper him and he may poison you. Hire him and he may hate both you and the work. Love him too possessively and he is never weaned. Deny him too early and he never learns to love. Put him in cities and all his animal nature comes out with perversions of every good thing. For greed, acquisitiveness, and violence were so long his tools for jungle survival, that it is only by the hardest [effort] that these can be laid aside as weapons of his continued survival.”

Reference:

Ernest Kurtz, Katherine Ketcham. *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning*. Bantam, reprint edition, 1993.