

Who Gets Mercy?

Genesis 45:1-15

Psalm 120

Matthew 15:21-28

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Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

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Allow me to begin by reading you a paragraph from that short simple little book, Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace?

“When Boris entered the room, Prince Andrey was listening to an old general, wearing his decorations, who was reporting something to Prince Andrey, with an expression of soldierly servility on his purple face. ‘All right. Please wait!’ he said to the general, speaking in Russian with the French accent which he used when he spoke with contempt. The moment he noticed Boris he stopped listening to the general who trotted imploringly after him and begged to be heard, while Prince Andrey turned to Boris with a cheerful smile and a nod of the head. Boris now clearly understood – what he had already guessed – that side by side with the system of discipline and subordination which were laid down in the Army Regulations, there existed a different and a more real system – the system which compelled a tightly laced general with a purple face to wait respectfully for his turn while a mere captain like Prince Andrey chatted with a mere second lieutenant like Boris. Boris decided at once that he would be guided not by the official system but by this other unwritten system.”ⁱ

Today we are reflecting on inclusion and exclusion, who’s in and who’s out, Boris or the General? Who gets chosen for the team and who doesn’t? Who gets mercy and who doesn’t? Mercy may be defined as compassionate treatment of those in distress. How big is the circle of God’s love?

With the start of school, we will see teams forming, groups coming together, cliques gathering, some are cool popular kids, some are loners, some are Brainiac, some are athletes, some are musicians. We all have this natural tendency is to segregate among only our own kind.

Is there any hope, here - first for Joseph and then for his brothers to offer and receive mercy? Or is murder, selling off your pesky upstart little brother, then later this brother put in a position where he could enact revenge- or, as he, healing and preservation, mercy, for his family and his nation and really for a new and better way than the world teaches? As he says;

“I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.... So, it was not you who sent me here, but God.”ⁱⁱ “God sent me before you”

Are you one for war or one for peace? Here the Psalmist in Psalm 120 is living in an alien culture, an outsider in a foreign land that does not value him or his God, and he anguishes over the differences, and God’s apparent silence.

I am an alien in Meshech, (which was way to the North near Russia,) that I must live among the tents of Kedar, (which was way down to the south near Arabia.) I am for peace; but when I speak they are for war.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And what about foreigners who look different and believe differently from you? In essence, what values do we actually put into practice in our everyday lives? Are we building bridges or barriers?

As followers of Jesus we know there are two systems at work: the ways of the world and the ways of God’s kingdom. Yet there is always a two-tiered system going on all the time, in both the church and the culture. There is always the official hierarchical ranking system of who reports to whom, who is boss, who is worker. As Tolstoy’s quote illustrates. We have official lines of accountability, but, and especially I think here in the South, also there are unspoken lines and relationships where the really important decisions are made and deep ties are formed. The person who is the club president is not always the person who is really in charge.

Through many centuries God came again and again, through patriarchs and prophets and kings, trying to show his new and different way, his different value system. Ultimately, because Israel never fully gets it, (the chosen people in both testaments kept putting up walls and barriers when what was needed were bridges.) So, God finally came down, metaphorically came down, shrinking himself from heaven to earth in the form of his own Son to become a real human being. We call this shrinking “the Incarnation.” Jesus becomes God in human flesh, God with us.

A part of the Divine Being. While being fully still Divine, God becomes fully human, small, little, tiny, born as a baby in an out of the way insignificant town out in an animal stall. Jesus become a mere mortal for you and me and the whole world, then spends his adult public ministry years teaching his Kingdom of God values system. It’s actually an inverted pyramid. He teaches and lives out a servant style of leadership, vividly portrayed at the Last Supper when he takes off his outer coat, wraps himself in a towel, and with a bowl of water goes humbly to each disciple at the dinner table and washes their feet. After he’s finished he tells them what he has done means, as well as reminds them of who he is.

“You call me Teacher and Lord- and you are right, for that is what I am. So, if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.

For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.... If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”^{iv}

Jesus, comes first to Israel as David’s Son for his own people, the Jews, and of course all his life Jesus remained a Jew. But he does not limit his message only to the Jews. He comes as the Savior of all nations and peoples. That is what this unusual story of Jesus with this Canaanite woman shows. You see - Canaanites were outsiders, aliens and pagans. They were despised by the Jews. In the Hebrew Bible they were enemies whom Israel conquered. Jesus has traveled out to their territory of Tyre and Sidon. Now this no count Canaanite woman comes to Jesus begging for mercy. And we might at first glance be thinking Jesus here is behaving all too much like a mean little human being ignoring her altogether. We’re the in crowd. She’s the out crowd.

We all have this human tendency to reduce Jesus to just our little group, my Jesus, my circle, my fellowship, my denomination when actually he is much bigger. He is the Universal Christ. He is the Cosmic Christ.

When we came to Birmingham in 2001 our daughter entering the 7th grade. She came from being a cheerleader, a school leader in Bowling Green KY to being an outsider new kid at school. In Bowling Green, her 5th grade essay at Potter Gray Elementary School was selected as the winner of all the 5th grade essays in the city about Martin Luther King, Jr. She was honored with an award at the annual city-wide teachers banquet. Coming to Mountain Brook Elementary as a 7th grader, she tried out for cheerleader and didn’t make it. For the dance team, the Dorians and didn’t get it – she tried out for other groups – didn’t get in. But she was persistent, she found her niche in high school working on the yearbook. Her senior year she was editor in chief of the year book!

What about this Canaanite woman and her child who was being tormented by a demonic spirit? She comes shrieking like a woman in labor pains. “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon. Strangely - at first Jesus does not even answer her. Next - the disciples say, “Get her out of here. She is not one of us, not our kind. She is not among the chosen. Get rid of her!

Jesus finally does address her, but in a distant textbook, by the rules, sort of way.” I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” And that is true, in a sense – first but not only Israel.” But that’s not the message she needs to hear at this moment. What’s wrong with Jesus here? Has he forgotten who he is? And what he came to do?

Persistently though, this outsider will not be pushed off to the side. “But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me?” He says “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Dogs were despised among the Jews. What is Jesus up to here? Is he limiting God’s mercy and grace to one little race and one little religion, and one little region?

Actually, he is doing precisely the opposite. And it takes an outsider woman like this to get the message through to the in group he is a part of. You see, she does not let loose of trusting that she is here before the one who is able to heal her little daughter. She replies, to him – going toe to toe - “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.” “She has a deep and profound faith. She may not have her doctrines all correct. She may not be born to a noble Jewish family. But she has deep and profound faith in Jesus.

And because of this faith, she now fully has Jesus’ attention. “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” He says.” And her daughter was healed instantly.” God’s mercy extends even to her.

Where would any of us be without the mercy of God? As my friend Todd Jones has said,

“Nowhere is this mercy, this kindness, this healing strength, this reconciling peace, this forgiving love more vividly seen and palpably experienced than in Jesus.

“Blessed are the merciful,” he said.

Mercy produces something new. Mercy causes to exist something which was not there before.” Indeed, mercy trumps justice. This woman receives mercy. Though we are left scratching our heads over just what she had to go through to get it.

Martin Luther said of this woman,” The woman caught Jesus in his own words.” She reminded Jesus who he was and what actually he had come for. He had come for the hungry and the thirsty and the poor in spirit. He had come not to despise, ignore, or turn away a suffering person, if they did not meet all the outward criteria. As Luther went on saying, “She threw the sack of his promises down at his feet.”^v

I do not think Jesus was being cold, hard-hearted to this woman, but rather was using this as a teaching opportunity, when through her the religious insiders, the Pharisees and scribes of Judaism, and later the Jewish heritage Church Matthew was addressing, for Matthew more than any other Gospel explicitly makes connections with the Hebrew Bible, and quotes more Old Testament Scriptures, all in an effort to help this tradition abound old wineskins Jewish heritage type church see that God has come in his Son of David to break down all the barriers. He came not only for Jews but for everyone. “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea. There’s a kindness in God’s justice, which is more than liberty.”

It’s a lesson the church down through the centuries has had to remember and relearn again and again. It’s why we had to have a Reformation in the 16th Century. It’s why in our time there is a lot of movement in and out of different types and styles of faith communities.

We can all get too comfortable with our kind of folks turn inward, when what we must do is reach and stretch and keep on growing. As William Sloane Coffin says, “To receive God’s mercy, you must be open to it. God cannot lodge in a narrow mind. God cannot lodge in a small heart. To accommodate God our hearts and minds must be palatial.”^{vi}

Yes, we all tend to pull in our wings, hang around only folks who are like us. It is to combat this all too human tendency that God sent Jesus and gives us the Gospel. For everyone needs Mercy, washing, cleansing, healing, compassion - forgiveness. "I am your brother, Joseph."

A man was unhappy with his neighbor across the valley who kept pestering him. So, he bought a big expensive load of lumber and hired a carpenter to come and build him a wall around his property to keep his neighbor out. Then the man went away on a trip while the wall was being built. But the builder, looking at the big deep valley separating the two houses, between the man and his neighbor, it was almost impossible to travel across. So, he took that lumber and instead of a wall he built a bridge. On his return the man was irate – but a bridge was needed.

Friends, we need more bridges and fewer walls. We need more of the mercy of God so we can respond not by our lower nature but by our higher nature, to others with mercy – not with our demons but with our angels.

On March 4, 1861, Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated as our 16th President when the nation was deeply divided. The country was torn over slavery. Since his election seven Southern States including Alabama had seceded from the Union, and many Americans feared the other eight slave states would follow. Americans anxiously awaited to hear from their new President. Lincoln, trying to allay the fears of those who perceived him to be a radical and those who sought to break the bonds of the union, appealed for a gradual approach through scheduled elections and amendments. He did not want conflict and he implored his fellow citizens to stop and think before taking rash steps. He concluded his case in this his most famous passage of this most famous first inaugural address,

"I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

My friends God is at work in each of us. May he grant us mercy that we may be merciful. May we live bigger broader more accepting of others lives, not smaller, tighter, narrower, constricted lives. It is August, but we are going to sing with a Christmas Carol. Because God came among us as a little child who grew to be our Savior everything is different now. Even us.

"Hark the herald, angels sing. 'Glory to the newborn King.
Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!
Light and life to all He brings, Risen with healing in His wings.
Mild he lays his Glory by, Born that we no more may die.

Born to raise us from the earth, Born to give us second birth.
Hark! The herald angels sing, 'Glory to the newborn King!'"^{vii}

Amen.

ⁱ Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace - Part III, Chapter 9, found in CS Lewis's – Essays

ⁱⁱ Genesis 45:4-5, 8

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 120:5-7

^{iv} John 13:13-15, 17

^v Martin Luther, quoted and referenced by Helmut Thielicke, How to Believe Again, p.88

^{vi} William Sloane Coffin, quoted by Todd Jones, in a sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN, 7-18-04, "A God Named Mercy."

^{vii} The Presbyterian Hymnal, "p. 31