



From the Pulpit: March 10, 2024

Fifth Sunday in Lent—Special Music, Minute for Outreach, Daylight Saving

The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Matthew 5:1–4

God’s Odd Benedictions, V: The Merciful

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he began to speak and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Mercy is God’s “action, or precisely a re-action” to suffering.⁴ In the book of Exodus before God raises up Moses and leads his people out of Egypt, before Pharaoh is confronted, when all hope seems lost, it goes like this:

God says “I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and I have heard their complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well that they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them.”

Therefore I have come down to rescue them.

Mercy is God’s “therefore.” Mercy is God’s action and reaction, God’s response and God’s reply to our groaning prayer. When there is suffering, God cannot turn away. Mercy is the action of God. Mercy is the realm of God.

“God and mercy are inseparable, for God mercy is primary, pivotal, and paramount.”

Before we loved, God loved us first. In the same way before we showed mercy, God showed mercy to us. If “in the beginning, God,”¹ then “in the beginning, mercy”² God’s predisposition for mercy is guttural, primordial. “In the beginning was mercy” When there is suffering, God cannot turn away. We might live among a humanity tarnished by “a globalization of indifference”³ says, but mercy is God’s already, God and mercy are inseparable, for God mercy is primary, pivotal, and paramount.

And so when Jesus ascends the mountain to share what the kingdom of God is like, and he says “blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy,” there is something inherently foolish knit within. You cannot win or achieve or work for or attain something that already was in the beginning. “In the beginning was mercy.” This is not something that can be earned. Mercy is not tit for tat, quid pro quo, like for like, or what goes around comes around.

Mercy already was, already has been, always will be.

¹In many translations of scripture, the first four words of Genesis are “In the beginning God”

²John Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, Orbis Books, 1994.

³Pope Francis. (2013). *Evangelii Gaudium* [The Joy of the Gospel]. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

⁴ibid.

In late 2015, Pope Francis designated a year of mercy. He called it a Jubilee of Mercy. I love this. 1.3 billion people energized, motivated, galvanized, ignited in the direction of mercy. A time for all to go out and offer mercy, to live out the mercy that God has for us. Pope Francis says that “The name of God is mercy”, that the very name of God is mercy, and he says “Jesus of Nazareth by his words, actions, and entire person reveals the mercy of God.”⁵ Jesus of Nazareth is the living face of our God of mercy. The very character of God, the very nucleus of God, the core identity of God is mercy.

Mercy is Matthew 25: *I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room, I was shivering and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you stopped to visit, I was in prison and you came to me.*⁶

What does mercy look like? For Garry Monteiro, mercy looks like 140 Clarion Street, Boston, Massachusetts.⁶ He had an advancing career as a mail carrier, but he was called away to move home to care for his aging parents. He left it all behind, knowing he’d have to start over once they passed. Mercy for him meant care for his parents. Mercy meant a son standing vigil over his parent’s decline. Mercy meant a labor of love. Fifteen years later, they were both gone, and he had nowhere to go. He lived with his brother for a time, but without stable employment or a real path forward, Garry ultimately arrived at Pine Street shelters in Boston. For two years, he slept in a room with 30 or 40 people. For Garry mercy meant shelter. Mercy meant stability. Mercy meant access to food. Mercy meant some semblance of health care, some but not much.

In 2020 the pandemic halted progress on an upscale hotel development at 140 Clarion Street in Boston. When the project was abandoned, a miracle happened.

⁵Pope Francis. “Misericordiae Vultus.” Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, Vatican City, 11 April 2015.

⁶Sambajon, Troy Aidan. “Why Boston’s Wealthy Back Bay Said Yes, in Our Backyard.” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 14, 2024.

Community associations and developers “backed a permanent supportive housing community—complete with on-site social services—in the heart of one of Boston’s most expensive neighborhoods” Back Bay. This is unheard of.

We are in a season of “globalized indifference.” We are in a NIMBY world, “not in my backyard,” they say.

In LA, the NIMBY response halted an abandoned motel being developed into supportive housing: it will plummet housing values they said. In Austin a housing community was halted over fears of traffic congestion, they said.

“Sometimes
mercy means
drawing near.”

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. What does mercy look like? For Garry Monteiro, mercy looks like a bed to call his own, a place where he can come and go as he pleases. Mercy looks like a fridge, a cabinet to store his food. Mercy is solitude after spending two years sleeping in a shelter with several dozen other men. Mercy is security. “Right now” he says “I have \$4 sitting on my nightstand. I’ve come and gone all week and it’s still there.” Mercy is alive for Garry Monteiro. “And the name of God is mercy.”

Mercy is not just almsgiving, providing support from afar. Mercy is not just Matthew 25 but Romans 12: *contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers; bless those who persecute you; rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep; repay no one evil for evil, but so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.* Sometimes mercy means drawing near. Gregory of Nyssa says mercy is “a voluntary sorrow that joins itself to the suffering of others.” Theo of Ochrid says mercy includes almsgiving, but also “tears of compassion.” Bernard of Clairvau describes the merciful as those who feel the joys and troubles of others as their own, “rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep.” Mercy is empathy. John Calvin says, “mercy is the sadness we feel experiencing the sadness of others.” Jeremiah Burroughs says that “true mercy, the mercy of Jesus’ beatitudes, has to draw close enough to suffering to weep with those who weep.”⁷

⁷Rebekah Eklund and Dale C. Allison, Jr. *The Beatitudes through the Ages*, Eerdmans Publishing, 2021

You have done this. You do this all the time. You draw close enough to suffering to weep with those who weep. When you serve at a memorial reception. When you serve as a Stephen minister. When you bring a meal, deliver flowers, write a card. This is the kind of mercy that happens when Robin Roberts brings teenagers to the Night Ministry bus to serve dinner to those who are living without stability, without resources, without a home or a bed or even a tent to call their own. This is the kind of mercy that happens when Kent Born takes a generation of young people to Belize, Cuba, Columbia, Puerto Rico, or simply to sing Christmas carols at a nursing home barely seven miles away at the corner of Fargo Avenue and Sheridan Road. Mercy is a “voluntary sorrow that joins itself to the suffering of others.”

Mercy is also forgiveness. Our mercy follows in the way of God’s mercy which is slow to anger and full of grace and forgiveness. Célestin Musekura was studying abroad in 1994 and therefore was not home in Rwanda that spring when the heavy persistent rainfall was accompanied by the unthinkable but persistent sorrow of death and despair. One hundred days of genocide left Dr. Musekura’s home country with “no hope and no possibility of a future.” He said this natural tragedy “literally ended our lives.” When he was finally able to go home, he found those who survived in unspeakable grief. One million people died in little more than four months. An uncountable number lived and then died in refugee camps in Tanzania, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Uganda. As a pastor himself, Dr. Musekura spent the next year meeting with Rwandan pastors. They were grieving wives, children, and whole congregations asking “Does God care about us? Where was God when? In stories not unlike those of the Holocaust, some pastors hid neighbors or strangers in their sanctuaries, under floorboards or between walls. But when the militia came to the pastor’s door, some pastors became afraid and gave up those who were hiding, and now asked questions like “Why did I not die with them? Can I be forgiven for what I did? Can I be of any use now?”

“Mercy means detangling the web of blame.”

What does mercy look like for these pastors? For their villages? For their country? In the months that followed, revenge killings were common. The cycle of violence had the capacity to be unending. This *was* tit for tat, quid pro quo, like for like, and what goes around comes around. Dr. Musekura says, “for those of us who survived the cataclysmic violence, resurrection became a necessity. Without the practice of forgiveness...we had no hope for a future.” He dedicated his life to seeking forgiveness across the multitude of sorrows. For Dr. Musekura, mercy means forgiveness.⁸

In a similar way, Desmond Tutu was an Anglican priest and chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, investigating human rights abuses under the apartheid system. His wide smile and contagious laughter is a reminder that he found deep joy in life, even as he stood in the places of deepest grief, and I believe his smile was possible because of his trust in the hard human work of mercy and forgiveness. But he was not unsympathetic to the impossibility of forgiveness, either.

In his book, “The Book of Forgiving” after describing a harrowing gruesome death of a young man who had been killed by pro-apartheid militants, he offers this prayer, empathizing with the ways in which we find ourselves unwilling to forgive, unwilling to extend mercy, even if we deeply desire or trust or long to forgive. He calls it the Prayer Before the Prayer, which says:

*God, I want to be willing to forgive
But I dare not ask for the will to forgive
In case you give it to me
And I am not ready
I am not yet ready for my heart to soften
I am not yet ready to be vulnerable again⁹*

⁸Célestin Musekura and L. Gregory Jones, *Forgiving As We’ve Been Forgiven: Community Practices for Making Peace*, InterVarsity Press, 2010.

⁹Tutu, D., & Tutu, M. (2014). *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*. HarperOne.

—The Prayers of the People— The Reverend Christine V. Hides

For Desmond Tutu, mercy means releasing. Mercy means detangling the web of blame. Mercy means making room for freedom when freedom is neither deserved nor warranted. We love, because God first loved us. We show mercy because God first showed us mercy. In the beginning, God. In the beginning, mercy.

When we begin at the beginning—when we let God become mercy for us, then (as Nadia Bolz Weber says) all this God-stuff comes tumbling out of us and we can belong.¹⁰ We can live under the possibility of the impossible.

Desmond Tutu and Céleste Musekura worked in the worst of the worst kinds of human situations, breath-taking, beyond words, the nightmares of the unthinkable. But we can do harm to one another in even more mediocre ways. The mercy of forgiveness can become a way of life. Your sister wears your favorite sweat-shirt without asking? Your brother eats all the rest of your favorite snack? Your husband didn't replace the toilet paper? The mercy of forgiveness is something we practice day in and day out, no matter how insignificant. Offering the mercy of forgiveness, even in those meh, blah, humdrum sibling-to-sibling lack-luster micro-aggressions can become for us an echo of the kingdom of God here on earth.

Large and small.
Possible and impossible.
Mercy abounds.
May it be so.

Holy God whose streams of mercy never cease, God of the suffering and the compassionate, you forgive our debts and misdeeds. You know what it is like walk gently, amid the harshness, vitriol, and blame, that echoes off every platform. Lavish mercy is your very nature. We witness it in every sunlit, early-spring day, in the joyful return of birdsong, and the life-filled rustle of tiny creatures emerging from their winter rest.

Therefore, we come to with open hearts and hands asking for even more:

Lord have mercy on all those who hunger and thirst, and all who search wearily for a bed to rest and a roof overhead. Let there be places of refuge. Let there be helpful companions to help navigate the way.

Let your compassion transform those in places of power whose hearts are hardened to innocent people in harm's way. Bring an end to terror and violence. Bring essential aid. Bring possibilities for peace and thriving in war ravaged places.

Let peace descend upon our youth in this season of tests and admissions. Ease anxious hearts. Bring wise guides who show that there are many ways forward from places where we seem stuck. Bring positive results and hoped-for answers.

Rest your tender hand upon all who are recovering from recent surgeries, all who await test results, all who struggle in body, mind, or spirit. Bring healing and gentleness.

Let your tears flow with those of the grieving. Be present with those whose relationships have fractured. Be hope for those who have lost loved ones. Be the promise of eternal life for those in their dwindling days.

As we turn to this table, we give you thanks, Holy God for Jesus Christ, the fountain of mercy that overflows and the love which knows no end.

In a fractured and hurting world, make us to see one another with Christ's kind and compassionate eyes.

By your Spirit make us curious about the lives of others, that we might be able to extend just a fraction of the mercy you lavish upon us. Let us pray as Jesus taught us, Our Father... Amen.

¹⁰Bolz-Weber, Nadia. "The Antidote." Online video clip, The Work of the People, <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/person/nadia-bolz-weber/films>, accessed March 2024.

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