

November 2, 2014

The National Presbyterian Church
**The Beatitudes - Happy Are the Merciful –
“Abundant Grace, Abundant Giving”**

Psalm 112:1-10; Matthew 6:19-34; Matthew 18:23-35

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This fall in our sermons we're looking together at one of the most famous sections of Jesus' teaching in the pages of the gospels, the account of Jesus' ministry, Matthew's gospel chapters 5, 6 and 7 contain what we call the Sermon on the Mount – a particular body of Jesus' teaching that begins with a preface, an introduction of eight statements about happiness that we call the Beatitudes. And it's on these Beatitudes in particular that we have been focusing, looking together at these eight statements. So far we have looked at six of these statements.

1. Happy are the poor in spirit. That's how the Beatitudes begin.
2. Happy are those who mourn. (This is not the normal course for finding happiness that we would find commended to us in the society in which we live.)
3. Happy are the poor in spirit says Jesus.
4. Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.
5. Happy are the pure in heart.
6. Happy are the peacemakers.
We've looked at these six so far.
7. We have still to pay attention to one, the eighth one which goes “Happy are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,” one of the strangest of the Beatitudes.

And in a couple of weeks we are going to look again at the one in which Jesus says “Happy are the peacemakers.”

But today we're going to be looking at that Beatitude which says this. Jesus: “Happy are the merciful . . .” . . . here's where you find happiness . . . ***“Happy are the merciful for they will receive mercy.”***

- This is a Beatitude which is highly appropriate not only in this stewardship season in which we find ourselves, in which we as a congregation have been called to acts of mercy. And in order to do that we not only need our lives but we need our resources to share our resources so that they can be used for the merciful works of God in this place and around the world.
- But this is a Beatitude which is especially appropriate, as well, as we think together on this *All Saints Sunday* about those people whom God has used to impact our lives, to touch our lives – people who in one way shape or form in the distant past, in the recent past, in the present have impacted our lives by their faith and by their love, and in many cases by the mercy that they have shown to us. Indeed the truth of the matter is this: without fellow Christians, “saints,” that God brings into our lives who show us mercy, the chances are that

some of us would not be here today. It is because of mercy shown to us by someone, at some time or another, that we all are where we are today.

- Mercy is what we need when we reach some kind of dead end in life, whether it's through our own fault or through no fault of our own at all.
- Mercy is what we need in order to give us a fresh start, in order to give us a new hope, in order to give us a second chance or in some cases a third or a fourth or a fifth chance to start again in some way or another.
- Mercy is what we need from someone in power and with resources to spare when we find that we have no power, and we do not have resources (or at least we do not have the resources that are needed at this particular moment) to get out of whatever situation we're in which is "trapping us," from which there seems to be absolutely no exit.
- That mercy can come in the form of a financial gift that we need to bail us out of some situation or another or to open a door to the future.
- That mercy can come in the form of the gift of forgiveness when somebody "lets go" of the hold they have, the grip they have on our life, because of something we've done.
- That mercy can come through a word of advice, giving us a way for us to see the future that we hadn't seen before – and "the lights suddenly go on" in our lives.
- That mercy can come through a simple hand on our shoulder from somebody who comforts us when there seems to be absolutely no one who is on our side; and there they are! And they give us that time; they give us that touch which changes our life.

Mercy is what all of us need at some time in some way from someone when we are powerless and we're in need and we need some hope, and we are at some kind of a dead end.

Over the years as a minister I've been with members of my congregations who have been in some really dark moments, some really desperate seemingly dead ends. On one occasion I was in court with a bright young man, a student on the verge of being thrown out of a really good university to which he had gone on scholarship. He'd done something wrong. In this case it was his own fault. He had done something stupid, and as with many students it was related to the abuse of alcohol. He had been held in jail for almost a week at that time when his court case came up. And I was there that day and I watched him in this orange suit (it was just like watching television!) and in chains, before the judge. And he was there at the mercy of the judge, at the complete mercy of the judge. And it seemed to be an interminable amount of time as the judge went on and on about what had happened, and all I wanted to hear is "What's your decision? Will you show mercy or not?" And fortunately when the moment came, it was a decision of mercy. With more than one or two days extra in jail that young man would have been thrown out of college, thrown out of university. His whole future would have been radically changed in that one moment. But the judge said, "You've served your time. Just 24 more hours and then you're free to go. You have to do mandated counseling." He then, added, almost as an afterthought, "But I expect that I'll see you back in my court again. I don't think this will work." I tend to

think he said it in order to egg-on this young man, as if to say, “I’m not going to be that person who is back in your court.” Ten years have passed since that time and as far as I know that young man has not been back in a court like that, and his life has taken a completely different and positive direction. But it’s all because of mercy – his life was in the hands of another who had power that the young man did not have, at a moment in his life when (through his own fault) he had come to a dead end. And mercy had been shown, when it didn’t have to be – mercy was shown, and it changed everything his life.

Sometimes we need mercy because we are powerless, and our powerlessness is our own fault. But sometimes it’s just because we live in a world which is complex. It’s complicated and there are forces around about us that impact and sometimes overwhelm our lives. Some of those forces are overtly evil. Some of them neither seem to be good nor evil but they are more powerful than we are. And we are in the midst of those forces, and at times we find there is nothing that we can do to gain or regain control of our lives; and we feel caught in this spiral and we’re going down.

Like the time I was in the airport in Toronto in Canada. I was face-to-face with a United States immigration official. Now not many of you have been face-to-face with a United States immigration official though some of you may have been. It can be a rather scary thing. I was trying to get back into the United States (before I became a citizen) and it was difficult. He wasn’t going to let me in even though I was married to an American (to whom I am still married!). I wanted to come back and see my wife and this man was not going to let me come back into the country. I’d been in Toronto to complete the process for ordination in the Presbyterian Church in Canada. I had been assigned a church to go to. I had a job that was waiting for me within a couple of months and I was just returning to Massachusetts to pack our bags to help us move and to head to where I wanted to serve God faithfully.

My student visa for seminary had run its course. I had graduated. I went to the consulate in Toronto. I checked off all the boxes. I did all the right things. I got my visitor visa and I was standing there in front of this official in Canada (the US immigration officials are on the Canadian side of the border) and I thought all was well. And then he asked me a couple of questions. He said, “Who are you going to visit?”

And I blithely said “I’m going to visit my wife.”

“You’re going to visit your wife? Do you have an address in the United States?”

I said “Yes, of course I have an address in the United States.”

Then he said: “You’re not going to visit, you’re going to live . . . and I cannot let you in.” And I was stuck. Absolutely stuck. A dead end. No credit card, no money, nothing. Absolutely stuck. And then, I think it was God who put a thought into my mind: I had not packed in my suitcase though I almost did a letter saying that I’d been interviewed and I had a job. And I had it right there and I pulled it out and I handed it to him. And while I was standing there, at his mercy, I said “Could you just read this? Could you please read this?” And he said “All right!” And he read the letter. He saw the official letterhead. He saw that I had a job, that I would be

leaving the United States soon and going elsewhere, and in his mercy he said (and this was before 9-11 when they could show more mercy than they can have leeway to show today), in his mercy he said “Okay, I will let you in!”

And what a sense of relief! What an enormous sense of relief. Utter relief. I can feel it still to this day. . . . a sense of relief, *which surely all of us at some time or another have known* if we look back within our lives: knowing that sense of absolute powerlessness in the presence of somebody who wields power over our lives, in some way shape or form, and can make a decision either to let us go or to hold us down, to push us down or lift us up – and they choose, they choose in their mercy, to use their power for us and not against us.

Andy Crouch who was with us a few weeks ago (one of the editors of *Christianity Today* magazine) spoke in his recent book, *Playing God*, about the tendency of many in our world to use their power not for mercy but for mastery, not for mercy but for domination, not for mercy but for supremacy. He speaks of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche like this:

In Nietzsche’s vision all of us are on a quest for omnipotence – the ability to become master over all space. We all would become not so much gods plural as god singular, a singular triumphant deity. The only problem is other bodies, every other body, everybody else that is who are engaged in exactly the same quest. For Nietzsche even the most seemingly sympathetic and moral of communities is just under the surface a temporary and expedient set of alliances based on sufficient similarity to justify working together for the moment to defeat those other bodies who are also seeking to dominate all space and time. But this union, this coming together, this seeming community is in fact says Andy Crouch just a holding pattern according to Nietzsche. A momentary alliance until the threat from the others can be quelled. The moment that one body sees the opportunity it will dissolve all previous alliances and seize the opportunity to take over, even from its own closest relations, ultimately to borrow from another quasi-Nietzsche an artifact of popular culture the world is not enough for the god-like ones who will win this struggle for control. They must be like gods extending their mastery further and further until eventually there will be nothing left but their own absolute supremacy. They must be like gods extending their mastery further and further until eventually there will be nothing left but their own absolute supremacy.

In other words, what Crouch is saying as he looks at Friedrich Nietzsche is that the natural tendency of the powerful is to use their power to press others down, not to lift others up; and I would add to that – that the natural tendency of the powerful is in fact to ignore the powerless, to ignore those in need: we live our own lives we’re just too busy, too busy to notice those who are in need. To walk-on-by, as the scripture would say, on the other side. But here’s the good news, the good news of the gospel (and in the light of Nietzsche it is remarkable news, amazing news, miraculous news): that the one who is all powerful, whom we would like to be like, and whom at times we might like to replace, the one who is all powerful, Almighty God, truly almighty,

chooses to use his power in the first place to notice us and then not to press us down or to crush us but to lift us up, to lift us up. As The Letter of James says in the second chapter “With God mercy triumphs over judgment.” With God mercy triumphs over judgment. God is a judge. There will be justice in the end. But God’s passion is not to press down and condemn. Mercy with God triumphs over judgment. Or, as the Apostle Paul would put it in Ephesians “God is rich, (rich, generous) in mercy. This is the God made known to us in Jesus Christ. God is rich in mercy.

This vision of God is something we see presented to us visually in the bread and the cup that is on the table here today, and then the cross which hangs above our head, two symbols, fundamental symbols of the Christian faith which in our Presbyterian church (where we have relatively few symbols) are there to remind us that at the heart of our worship, at the heart of almighty God is mercy. Mercy!

- God’s passion is to use his supreme power not to crush us but to lift us up and to give us life when we have figuratively and literally reached a dead end.
- God’s passion to use his power to show us mercy whether it’s our own fault or not, whether we’re simply caught in the mess that is the world, the complexity that is the world, or whether we have deliberately done something wrong.
- God reaching out to us and saying to us, “No question about it you’re guilty! No question about it you’re in a mess! No question about it you’re in over your head! And though at times you are powerful in this moment you are powerless. But I love you! And I cannot stand to see you being pushed down.
- So here’s my body which is broken for you and my blood which is shed for you. Here is my life given to you on the cross. Every sign that I can possibly give you that my hand is stretched out to you in your need to show you mercy. This is what I want to do for you.

And Jesus, in the passage we read, but also throughout all of his teaching, says to us quite simply that if God is like that, if Almighty God, the powerful one is like that, if the One who has power beyond all imagination is like that, then who are we – we who wield little specks of power and who all have been powerless, and who one day will all be powerless again – who are we to withhold mercy from others? to ignore them or to pass them by? or deliberately withhold mercy from others? . . . we who one day will all be weak and in need before the presence of God.

Let me put it another way as we close this morning, by bringing us back to All Saints Sunday. Let me describe the situation like this:

if the people we remember most, the people we most want to be like are those who have loved us and shown us faith and have shown us mercy,

if in fact there is almost a visceral reaction in our lives when we think of moments like being in quarter being at that place in the Toronto airport;

if our most visceral reaction is one of deepest gratitude for what they have done in our lives at that time,

ought we not as a response (as an act of gratitude to them and to God) to say, “This is who I want to be like as well? This is who God calls me to be like as well.” Don’t we want to be remembered as those who showed mercy to others?

Ethel Blackledge remembered her mother like this. It was her mother’s mercy that she remembered more than anything else. She writes these words. She says,

When I was a little girl in the 1930s my family moved to a house in Southwestern Ohio. At first the only source of water we had was a tank, a cistern, in which we caught rain water. Our next-door neighbors the Lawsons offered us water from their well when we needed it and my parents eventually saved enough money to have our own well dug. Soon after that a terrible drought hit the Midwest and wells began to dry up. Water could have been trucked in but the great depression had hit the nation and people had no money. They depended on nature. The lack of rain continued and soon the Lawsons’ well went dry. They asked if we could spare enough water for their use and mother replied without hesitation, ‘God gave us the water. God has been merciful to us. Take what you need.’

Then the Perkins, who lived across the street, came over and said their well too was dry. Mother gave them the same answer. As days went by with no rain, other neighbors came too all pumping water from our well. Mister Page, a neighbor whose well supplied water asked mother, ‘aren’t you scared letting all those people help themselves to your water? Your well will run dry.’ Again mother gave the same answer: ‘God gave us the water. We will share it.’ [DR: in other words, if this is what God is like, this is what I want to be like too.] A few days later Mrs. Gaines, a widow with five children who lived near the Pages, sent her young son up with an empty bucket: ‘Mama said you might be kind enough to spare some water from your well,’ he said shyly. ‘We used to get water from Mr. Page’s well, but he says we can’t have any more.’ Mother replied, ‘go to the well, fill your bucket, God is still giving us water.’

Day after day the hot sun burned down scorching fields around as creeks had long ago dried up the water disappearing. I remember the day when Mister Page with an empty bucket on his arm knocked at our door. ‘I know that I refused water to my neighbor’ he said, ‘and now our well has gone dry like the rest. If you could’ . . . and mother did not even let him finish the sentence. [DR: She wasn’t going to use her power at that moment to see him squirm any more, to push him down any more than he was already, though she had every reason to say he deserved all of it. She wasn’t going to do that. She showed him mercy from the very start of her words]. ‘If you could,’ . . . and mother did not even let him finish the sentence: ‘God gave us the water take what you need.’

As a result the Pages became the seventh family, many of them with small children who now carried water from our lone well. Throughout the dry hot days of that summer we furnished water to 50 people and our well never went dry.

After almost 60 years I still remember vividly how Mr. Page, having refused water to a widow with five children, came to our house with an empty bucket on his arm, begging for water, in need of mercy. Mother's affirmative answer taught me that if we take care of one another [DR: it could be with water, it could be with a financial gift, it could be with a word of forgiveness, it could be with our time, it could be with something that we know that somebody else needs to know, it could come this mercy in a hundred different ways]. . if we take care of one another God will take care of us.

Or Jesus puts it like this: "*Happy*," YES, Happy! *Happy are the merciful for they will receive mercy*. They know it. They know they've received it. And they will continue to receive it from a gracious and merciful God forever. Forever. *Happy are the merciful for they shall receive mercy*.

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