

August 5, 2018
11th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Beyond the Safe Place”

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Matthew 25:34-40

Then the Ruler will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Abba God, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me drink, I was a stranger, and you welcomed me, I was naked, and you clothed me, I was sick, and you visited me, I was in prison, and you came to me.' Then the just people will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

Beyond the Safe Place

This past Tuesday at our weekly staff meeting I posed three questions to the staff during our opening devotional. What is Mercy? How do you practice mercy in your daily life? And, in that daily practice what challenges you? Once we had heard the scripture passage, that you all heard this morning, we had a robust conversation about these three questions, each of us bringing our own ideas and experiences of one of the fundamental concepts of Christ's teaching and ministry.

What I thought would be a conversation that would help shape my sermon only left me with more questions and more wondering. It left me in outside of my safe place. I repeated this same exercise that evening with my wife, who grew up outside of the Christian tradition, asking her the same questions about mercy. The following conversation again made me confront my own fragility as I sought to understand this central concept of Christ's Gospel.

Richard Rohr writes "Throughout Scripture, we see God's mercy toward the outsider and the vulnerable. In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus makes our treatment of "the least of these brothers and sisters" the only real criteria for the final judgment. Jesus himself was a refugee, and his life and teaching show us what it means to welcome the stranger in our midst. Without love, "law and order" mentalities too often lead to dehumanization, concentration camps, and genocide. In today's political arena there is a lot of finger-pointing; we need to move beyond blame and rhetoric to take action on behalf of those who are suffering."¹

What I have come to discover Mercy as a concept of Christ's teaching is that it is an incredibly hard theme to wrap your head around. Sometimes Mercy can be confused with Forgiveness, which Amy talked about last month. Forgiveness is an action that we take to be in right relationship with ourselves, one another, and God. Through a practice of Forgiveness and Grace, we are invited by Christ to enter into the new covenant with God and to restore relationships that we have damaged. We are invited to find the opportunities where we have stumbled, separated ourselves, and royally messed up and forgive ourselves, forgive each other, and begin again in love.

¹ "Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation" Originally Published: June 22, 2018. (<http://email.cac.org/t/ViewEmail/d/221580C83AFB62B22540EF23F30FEDED/79F857D3CE6A14519A8E73400EDACAB4>)

Mercy as described in the passage we heard this morning, is not an action but an attitude that each of us has to live into. Mercy is about recognizing the full humanity, the inherent worth, and dignity in each and every person. It's about recognizing that all life, all creation, from you and I to our natural world and beyond to the whole cosmos is apart of God's cosmic sanctuary.

Mercy confronts our own human fragility head-on; it presumes power and privilege. It assumes that you and I have done our own work to challenge the systems of supremacy and to leverage our unearned power and privilege to care for those who the "status quo" has dreamed unworthy, less than human, and deplorable. God calls us out of our comfort zone to aid and comfort those who have been discarded and separated by the economic and human organizations that we have created.

Our role of the followers of Jesus is to move from of our safe place and join the work God is already doing in the world by living into an attitude of mercy.

In her adult life, Rayla Mattson happened upon a number of memorable car accidents. In one, a mother was unconscious while her small child was screaming in the back of the car. Rayla and a friend raced to pull the child from the mangled car, which was in a busy intersection. The police and the mother were thankful for our compassion in helping.

A few years later, Rayla was traveling home when she saw a car go down an embankment. She pulled over and ran back down the highway. When she got to the car, the woman inside asked, quite rudely, what she was doing. When she told her that she came to help, the woman seemed annoyed. The first-responders arrived and they, too, inquired why she had stopped and told her that she needed to mind her own business.

More years pass. Rayla was driving with her toddler and witness a car drive under a tanker. Without thinking Rayla jumped from her car and crawled under the tanker to the driver, who was confused, bleeding, and scared. While they waited together for help to arrive, Rayla helped to call the woman's family and cleaned her wounds. When help arrived, once again the police ask her why she stopped to help her when she had a small child with her. The police officer told her that she should have just kept going, to which she replied, "With a small child in the car, what message am I teaching if I don't help?"

If there is one theme that is prevalent throughout the biblical text is that God pushes God's people outside of their comfort zone. Time and time again God, challenges those who have been called to serve to free themselves from the cage of their comfort zone, the status quo, and move beyond to a place of growth, learning, and development in a way that expands their horizons beyond their wildest dream.

Following God's roadmap [forgiveness... compassion... empathy... hope... justice in our relationships with one another and the natural world] is uncomfortable it's not what our society has conditioned to accept. Living as a follower of Christ is a commitment to living uncomfortably: recognizing the privilege and power we have and leveraging it to help those who have been denied those privileges. We are called as people of mercy to challenge the status quo and speak out against injustice in our world. A daily reminder that you are not where you want to be, and the Kingdom of God may just be one step away.

Everything remarkable happens beyond the safe zone. God pushes us beyond our human capacity by pushing us into new areas where we can authentically define who we are, and break free of the limitations of what others think we should be.

One day it was her turn to need help: Rayla's car was stuck in a snowy embankment, and she could not get herself unstuck. She was getting more and more frantic, as her children were with her and the car was jutting out into the street.

Rayla's oldest child was confused: "why would no one stop and help us when you often stop to help others?" She was wondering the same thing as many cars splashed by. While she couldn't answer his question, She asked him to promise that if he were ever able to help someone, he would stop and help if he could. He thought about it. Even though people weren't stopping to help us, her son said, that he wanted to be more like his mother and stop to help someone anyway.

Living an attitude of mercy, brings us into the Kingdom of God, in this time and place. Where all people are recognized, not for the situation that they are in: the label society has given them" but as a unique and wonderful child of God.

In 2016 Addison Beaux, was traveling through Bradley International Airport in Hartford Connecticut, where he had the most socially conscious TSA pat down

ever. After exiting the body scanner, he told TSA staff, "The scanner is going to flag my crotch with a big yellow square." At that exact moment, the scanner results indeed showed the yellow square.

"Happens every time," Addison said.

Darlene, the TSA agent, asked, "Why do you think?"

"Because I wear boxer briefs," Addison replied

"Oh, what is the gender you would like to be identified as?" Darlene inquired.

"Well," Addison replied "I consider myself gender nonconforming. I am female and also transmasculine."

Darlene suggested that they saw what would happen when she told the machine that Addison was male.

Darlene made the adjustment and sent Addison through the scanner one more time. This time the yellow square disappeared. Though a yellow rectangle now appeared across Addison's chest. They both start laughing!

"In unison, they say "Now the machine is wondering about... Boobs," laughing together some more.

Darlene then asked Addison how he identifies so that she may pat me down accordingly. Darlene told him "You get to decide how you are identified."

After the screening and pat down, which confirmed Addison posed no harm and he was not hiding anything anywhere, He said to Darlene, "Thank you. That was the kindest and most socially aware TSA experience I have ever had. Your thoughtfulness really means the world to me."

Darlene replied, "I love people; We should be kind to everyone."²

Mercy calls us and individuals and us as the church of Christ to step outside of our comfort zone, stepping into the street to help our neighbor, the stranger, the refugee. It calls us to confront and leverage the power and privileges that we hold because of our identities not to maintain the status quo but to disrupt the systems of power and supremacy. There are still many more questions I have

² This story was published on Facebook by Addison Beaux in 2016. It represents his story as a person who identifies as Trans* and his experience traveling through Bradley International Airport in Hartford, CT. This story does not represent how other Trans* identifying people experience Airport security screening.

about living an attitude of Mercy in my life. It also leaves me wondering if the Kingdom of God is just one step outside of our comfort zone.

Amen