

The Beatitudes' Worship Series: "Blessed are..." (Matthew 5:1-12)
"Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy." (Verse 7)
Matthew 5:1-11; Isaiah 63:7; Zechariah 7:8-10; Psalm 42:1-5; Ephesians 2:1-10
Salem United Methodist Church; August 5, 2018
Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling

The Beatitudes are a set of statements which summarize not only Jesus' Sermon on the Mount but also his mission and ministry on earth. Each Beatitude names a human condition and connects it to a divine promise. Each Sunday we are looking at one of these blessings in the order listed. Today as the fifth Sunday of this worship series we are on the fifth Beatitude, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain (or receive) mercy." When have you received mercy? Who offered it to you? And how have you offered mercy to another?

Scenario #1: A new, ambitious doctor observes a seasoned and highly respected colleague making mistakes. The new doctor goes to the medical director to accuse the seasoned, respected doctor of malpractice.

Scenario #2: A farmer had a vicious dog which attacked and killed the neighboring farmer's little daughter. The community was so enraged that they had the dog killed and refused to sell the owner seed for his fields.

Scenario #3: A lender forgives an individual of a huge debt. This is a huge financial relief for the individual's family! However, several owe this individual money. So in order to become even more financially stable this individual goes to those that owe money and demands that they pay this individual immediately.

Each of these scenarios are examples of an ancient pattern of ambition, revenge, or retaliation. What's in it for me? Or, if you hurt me and I will hurt you harder. It is replayed in stories and real life throughout history and across cultures: Montagues and Capulets; the Hatfields and McCoys, Palestinians and Jews, Sunni and Shiites, the press and the White House. In the ancient world when a member of a tribe was victimized, the tribe's family would take revenge by wiping out the entire tribe. One incident could bring on the annihilation of an entire people. There is a law in Leviticus that states, "Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth..." (Leviticus 24:19-21). At first this law seems to encourage revenge, but it actually is promoting restraint. Its intent is to have the revenge equal the initial injury. Humans seem to naturally live by the Un-Golden Rule: "I want to do to you exactly what you have done to me and even hurt you more." Jesus calls for even more restraint in the Sermon on the Mount with these words, "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Matthew 7:37-39). What stops all the violence, the scheming for revenge, the war of words, hurting another for ambitious gain? Mercy.

Mercy is contrary to our human inclinations. Mercy thinks about the other before we think about ourselves. Mercy is the opposite of self-centeredness and selfishness. Mercy requires us to see through the eyes of the other, to understand how the other thinks and feels, or as the Native American proverb states, "to walk a mile in another's moccasins." Mercy is not pity. It is even more than helping someone in need. Mercy is being willing to forget ourselves and to make a conscious effort to identify with those who have different values, different viewpoints, different decisions, different lifestyles and needs. Here is an example. John Wheatley grew up working in the Scottish mines in the late 19th century. Because he lived in the depravity of the mining community, he became a social activist fighting for workers' rights. After being elected to the British House of Commons in 1922, he became known as a rebel and revolutionary. One day he had an audience with King George V who asked him why he was an agitator. Wheatley described to the king what he experienced as a child and how the working class was living in squalor because of their low wages. After the king listened to Wheatley, he said, "If I had seen what you have seen, I too would be revolutionary." Our natural inclination is to judge another without knowing anything about the other. Jesus talks about judging in the Sermon on the Mount, too. "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged" (Matthew 7:1-2). We will be judged by how we judge and we will receive mercy by how we are merciful. Judging another, revenge, and retaliation are contrary to offering mercy. One cannot judge and offer mercy. They are incompatible. Offering mercy is contrary to our human spirit, but offering mercy is at the heart of God's Spirit.

The Hebrew word for mercy is *chesed* which means God's unmerited favor. We do nothing to earn it. God grants it out of God's love for humanity. Moses describes God's *chesed* as "...merciful and gracious, slow to

anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Exodus 34:6-7a). What if God wasn’t merciful, or gracious, or slow to anger, or abounding in steadfast love to us? What if God held us accountable for every mistake, transgression, or sin we’ve committed? What if God gave us what we deserved? We are all in need of God’s mercy. We all need God’s pat of the back, saying, “It’s ok, forget it.” We all need God’s unmerited favor, God’s *hesed*, God’s love, kindness, and forgiveness. Where would we be without it? William Barclay, a 20th century biblical interpreter wrote: “The supreme demonstration of this mercy is the Incarnation. In Jesus Christ God literally entered into our skin, seeing things with our eyes, thinking things with our minds, feeling things with our hearts. The Incarnation is God’s complete self-identification with the sins, sorrowings, and sufferings of [humanity]...God made this supreme and sacrificial-identification with [humanity]; and that is why God understands, forgives, and saves.” Again, from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers us these words, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” (Matthew 6:12). We will be judged when we judge others, as well as, we will be forgiven as we forgive, and we will receive mercy as we offer mercy. Our behavior reflects what is in our hearts and minds. God knows our hearts and minds. We can only receive God’s mercy and forgiveness if we are open to receiving it and offering it to others. Our toxic world that values ambition, hate, violence, revenge, and retaliation is in need of receiving God’s *hesed*. Our world needs God’s mercy, graciousness, and love. As followers of Jesus who receive God’s mercy, how can we offer mercy to break the cycle of hate, violence, revenge, and retaliation?

Remember the three scenarios I mentioned in the beginning. Each one was about inflicting pain on another. The endings of all three show us how to break this cycle with mercy. In the third scenario the individual whose debt was forgiven demands those who were lent money to pay up now. This is from a parable that Jesus taught about the importance of forgiveness. It does not have a happily-ever-after ending. Jesus finishes the parable with these words. “Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matthew 18:33-35). These are harsh words. Sounds like if we are not merciful, we will not receive God’s mercy. If we do not forgive, we will not be forgiven.

In the second scenario in which the dog killed a girl and the community sought revenge against the dog’s owner by not selling him seed for his fields ends this way. The father of the dead girl had compassion for his neighbor, knowing that without seed, his neighbor would not survive. In the middle of the night so no one would know, he took the seed for his last planting, and sowed it in his neighbor’s field. The community witnessed his mercy when the seeds came up in his neighbor’s field while his field lay bare. The father forgave and offered mercy to his neighbor.

In the first scenario in which the new, ambitious doctor reported malpractice of a seasoned, respected colleague to the medical director ends with these words from the medical director to the ambitious doctor. “I’m going to suggest to you that if you persist in bringing formal charges, then be sure of one thing. Don’t ever as long as you live, make one single mistake.” The ambitious doctor was being mentored by the medical director to offer mercy or she will receive none when she is in need.

None of us are perfect. We all make mistakes and we all need to be held accountable for our mistakes. However, we also need mercy. Practicing mercy is not easy. It requires us to sow seed in our enemy’s field. It requires us to forgive as we have been forgiven. And it requires us to break the vicious cycle of violence, hate, revenge, and ambition. Those who receive mercy understand mercy, and are more willing to offer mercy to another. When we practice mercy, we are united with and blessed by God. When we fail to practice mercy, we separate ourselves from God. Even though it can be challenging, practice mercy and you will be blessed.

Reflection Questions: When have you received mercy? Who offered it to you? How have you offered mercy to another? In our toxic world, how can we as followers of Jesus, offer mercy to those who hate and who seek revenge?

Resources: *The Beatitudes and Lord’s Prayer for Everyman* by William Barclay; *Blessed to Follow* by Martha Stortz; *Beatitudes from the Back Side* by J. Ellsworth Kalas; *God’s Psychiatry* by Charles Allen.

