

Living Mercy

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
July 16, 2017
Text: Luke 6:27-36

Kyrie eleison. Lord have mercy. These ancient words have formed the bedrock of Christian worship for almost two thousand years. These words in many languages are part of the opening of the Mass offered every day, in settings large and small, all around the world. Lord have mercy is one of the most ancient of Christian petitions of prayer and one of the most universal for all who seek to follow Christ. That's why you can even find it in our hymnal – a United Methodist Hymnal being used in a United Church of Christ Congregation. Look it up! You'll find three versions of it from #482 through 484. *Kyrie eleison.* Lord have mercy. Yes, of course! Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us for all our sins. Have mercy on us for all those times we do what we know we should not. Have mercy on us for all those times we do not do what we should Lord, have mercy on us! Yes, please! But then what? How are we transformed by the Lord's mercy into people who show mercy to others? How do we become people who live mercy into reality every day? Now, that's the hard part.

The *Kyrie* can be spectacularly beautiful performed by a monastery choir highly skilled in Gregorian Chant. These choirs, often based in monasteries from both the Orthodox and Roman

church traditions, bring the *Kyrie* to life in complex harmonies. The notes, usually sung without accompaniment, soar heavenward drawing us with them, pleading as they do for God's mercy on all who fall short of God's expectations. That is, of course, all of us. The thing is, this notion of mercy is so much more than pleadings for God's mercy on us, beautiful and inspirational as these incredible chants might be. Mercy, after all, is not really about us. It's about the other people and situations in our lives and how we respond to them. That's because, dear friends, we have no business pleading for mercy from God if we do not work at showing mercy, giving mercy, living mercy with the people we encounter each day.

Jesus is quite clear about this in the text we read this morning from the Gospel of Luke. These verses fall within a sermon or something like a sermon which Jesus gives to the people who have gathered to hear him. This text in Luke's Gospel, which is often referred to as the Sermon the Plain, is very similar to the text in Matthew known as the Sermon on the Mount. Scholars don't know if they are both writing about the same event or if the respective texts are basically summaries of Jesus' teachings spoken over the course of his three year ministry. Truthfully, the power of these words from Jesus overshadows anything as mundane as when and where he spoke them. Whether he was on top of a hill speaking down to multitudes, or

surrounded by the crowd as he came down from the mountain after praying, his words leave no doubt as to where Jesus' priorities lay. "Love your enemies," Jesus says. "Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." And Jesus was just getting started! Put up with people hitting you, or taking your stuff, he says. "Do to others as you would have them do to you." There's that pesky Golden Rule again. Treat people the way you'd like to be treated. Don't respond to poor behavior with more poor behavior. Respond to poor behavior with kindness, with love, with mercy.

And just what is mercy in this context? Mercy, simply put, is extending compassion when punishment might be expected. Mercy is offering love when the logical response might be hate. Mercy is reaching beyond the demands of justice when you are the victim of wrong-doing, reaching instead for the higher moral ground of kindness, of grace, or understanding and respect. Mercy, in other words, often makes no sense whatsoever. This is exactly Jesus' point in the rest of this morning's text. "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them," Jesus explains. But he doesn't stop there. "If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same." Uh oh, we think. This is not looking good for us. We don't get credit for loving people who love us. Anyone can do that, Jesus says. We don't get

credit for doing good to people who are good to us? Geesh!
What's up with that? Surely Jesus doesn't mean we are supposed to love people who are mean to us? Surely Jesus doesn't mean we are supposed to do good for people who aren't good to us? Doesn't that mean we might do good for someone who doesn't deserve it? How can that be right?

Well, folks, that is exactly what Jesus is saying here. We are to do the right thing for everyone, not just the people who are like us – who look like us, think like us, believe the way we do. We are to do the right thing for *everyone* – even, *especially*, the ones who are different from us. That's what mercy is! Showing love and kindness and concern for others without stopping to worry about whether or not we think they deserve it. Mercy is love unchecked. Mercy is forgiveness undeserved. Mercy is God's grace made real through food for the hungry and shelter for the homeless regardless of who they are or how they got there. Mercy is God's gift to us every time God forgives us for the stupid, unkind, and thoughtless things we do and mercy is what God expects of us in our relationships with others. God expects us to recognize, dear friends, that mercy is so very easy to receive at the same time it is so very difficult to offer to others, especially those we decide don't deserve it. And, we have to admit, that list of who doesn't deserve mercy these days can be quite long. But, and this is what we have to remember, that list is always our list, not God's. In spite of

what we may want to think or believe, God does not have a list of folks who do not deserve mercy because, as Jesus reminds us over and over again, God offers mercy to everyone. What we do with that gift of mercy, however, is another thing entirely. And therein lies the tricky part of mercy. It's often hiding in plain sight in situations we encounter where we have the chance to be merciful, to do the right thing, the thing Jesus would have us do, but we hesitate for all sorts of reasons, most of them selfish. We hesitate to do the right thing, the merciful thing, because we worry about what others might think since the merciful thing to do is often not the easy or the popular thing to do.

This struggle to do the right thing, to show mercy when the world expects you to close your eyes to what's happening, or even just walk away, is all around us. We know this. We've experienced this. And we know others have too. If you love a good movie that makes you think, I have two to recommend to you as excellent opportunities to experience someone's struggle to be merciful when the world is telling them over and over again it's not necessary, or even wanted. One of those movies is *Concussion* starring Will Smith. He plays Dr. Benet Omalu, the coroner from Pittsburgh, PA who identifies CTE (Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy) as a chronic condition suffered by professional football players resulting from sustaining concussions repeatedly while playing football. Dr. Omalu persists in his research in spite

of death threats and the loss of his job due to pressure from the NFL. For much of the movie he does not understand that the NFL leadership does not want to accept that football is responsible for this horrendous illness and its impact on players and their families. He thinks if he just explains it to them, they will of course want to do the right thing for these players. “They are your men!” he says to the NFL team doctors and the NFL leadership over and over again. “You are responsible for them. They are dying! You must do something.” But they didn’t, except to do everything they could to discredit Omalu and drive him away. They succeeded, but only temporarily, as the NFL Players Association eventually accepted the truth of Omalu’s research using it as grounds for legal action still underway today. Dr. Omalu, a devout Catholic, did what he did because he could not imagine doing anything else. He could not walk away from the responsibility of knowing that CTE was killing players and destroying families. And because he wouldn’t walk away, because he wouldn’t close his eyes to this overwhelming need for mercy, that mercy was eventually forthcoming in spite of all those who tried to stop it. Dr. Omalu lived mercy into reality despite all the efforts to stop him.

So too did Attorney Jim Donovan whose story is told in the movie *Bridge of Spies* starring Tom Hanks. Jim Donovan is a successful New York attorney who is approached by the NY Bar

Association to defend Rudolf Abel from a charge of espionage during the Cold War era of the 1950's and 60's. Donovan knows from the outset that defending a spy at this time would make him extremely unpopular but he agrees to do it anyway, even becoming quite fond of Abel, whom he finds to be an honorable man, in the process. When Abel is convicted, a given from the outset, Donovan opts to pursue an appeal to the Supreme Court where he loses once and for all. But he did manage to convince the original trial judge to sentence Abel to 30 years in prison rather than death, the typical punishment for treason at the time. This act of mercy negotiated by Donovan also paved the way for an even greater act of mercy a short time later when he was able to negotiate the release of U2 pilot Francis Gary Powers, shot down over the Soviet Union in a US spy plane, in exchange for Rudolf Abel. Greater still, Donovan insisted that Frederick Pryor, a college student trapped accidentally inside East Germany when the border was sealed, also had to be part of the trade for Abel. Donovan's CIA handlers were furious that he muddied up the release of Powers "with some kid who didn't matter" as one of the CIA agents put it. But Donovan was adamant. Both Pryor and Powers for Abel, or nothing. And it worked. Pryor was released at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin at the same time that Abel and Powers walked past each other on the Glienicke Bridge. Donovan knew that Pryor would never be heard from again if he didn't hold

his ground, so he did. The movie makes clear that Donovan literally risked his own life several times as he negotiated behind the Iron Curtain for the release of three men – Rudolf Abel, Francis Gary Powers and Frederick Pryor – whom many people thought didn't deserve mercy at all. Abel was a spy. Powers should never have gotten himself shot down. Pryor should never have been in East Germany in the first place. To the governments involved, they were just protecting their own interests in the exchange. But to Donovan, it was all about mercy – mercy given and mercy received as a result.

So, as you head out into your week in the middle of this hot and muggy July, I hope you will keep a sharp eye out for mercy – where it's needed and where it's missing in the world you live in each day. And when you find it lacking, I hope you will find it within yourself to step up and step out to fill in that gap yourself as best you can. A smile to someone having a bad day, a word of encouragement to someone who obviously needs one – these are just a few things to do. And if you're still not sure what you should do in a given situation, just remember Jesus' advice – “Be merciful, just as God is merciful.” Let's pray to be up to that challenge. As my dad would say, if it was easy, anybody could do it. But you're not anybody. You are you, a Beloved and Merciful Child of God. Amen.