

“Love Mercy”

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Is my mercy about me, or is it about them?

Jeremiah 9:23-24

August 19, 2018

Toxic Charity

Today is the third in a series of four messages based on Micah 6:8, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you, but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” The theme is “Gospel Justice.” We are looking for your ideas of what it might look like to engage as a congregation in justice ministries – addressing the systems that keep people poor.

Gospel Justice can put us into “But Mode.” *But* shouldn’t sharing the Gospel have greater priority? *But* isn’t this more of a “liberal” thing? *But* what if I can’t afford it? *But* what if the person I’m trying to help misuses my aid?

Justice and mercy are consistently linked in the Bible. Justice is doing the right thing, and mercy is doing the kind thing. Is it possible that doing the kind thing is not always the right thing?

The book I’ve been reading the last couple of weeks titled, *Toxic Charity*, by Robert Lupton, says yes. It is also full of examples, like the following:

- The Atlanta Project (TAP). An initiative founded by former President Jimmy Carter in 1990 to address extreme poverty in Atlanta consolidated efforts of government at all levels, non-profits, and the media. Millions of dollars changed little over eight years and ultimately fizzled.
- A Presbyterian church brought in American equipment and engineers to build a desperately needed well in a Honduran village. When the missionaries returned, they found women still hauling water from miles away. When the well broke down, the locals waited for the foreigners to come back and fix their well.

- A church food pantry involved dozens of volunteers distributing free food in a needy neighborhood every Wednesday morning. But there was no noticeable improvement among people who simply assumed food would always be there for them without cost or expectation.

The question of the day is this: Does mercy always serve the cause of justice? Apparently charity sometimes does not alter the systems that keep people poor.

God's delight

For answers we turn again to Scripture. Jeremiah's prophecy straddles the fall of Judah to the Babylonians. He warned the people of judgment to come and, after it came, told them what to do next. (If you don't know anything about this period of history, I invite you to join my fall Sunday School class, "Understanding and Applying the Bible." My goal is to give you an overview of the whole Bible over 13 weeks.)

In our brief excerpt, Jeremiah addresses the self-sufficient wealthy: "Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches" (9:23). Wisdom, strength, and riches are all comparative, right? No one has all the wisdom, strength, or money. It's just that we have more than those around us. OK, God says, if you're going to compare, compare yourself to me. How wise are you compared to the all-knowing one? How strong, compared to the omnipotent God? How rich compared to the one who "owns the cattle on a thousand hills" (Psalm 50:10). The more I know God the less I am impressed by me.

But we're not just talking about head knowledge. The word "know" in the Bible is deep and personal intimacy. It's even used of the conjugal relation between husband and wife. God says, "I get you. I want you to get me."

Specifically, the Lord says, I want you to capture my heart, to grasp my vision. "I am YHWH, who exercises kindness (*chesed*), justice (*mishpat*), and righteousness (*tsedakah*)." The latter two words are similar, but justice is more closely associated with the judge, while righteousness is connected to the king. Both need to do the right thing.

This is a remarkable passage. Humans value rising above other humans in education, in power, in accumulation of wealth. Does it occur to us very often that God, looking down on us, really doesn't care about those things? To use the word in this text, he doesn't "delight" in the things that we think make us happy. God delights in mercy (kindness, goodness, love) and justice and righteousness (fairness, impartiality, systems that treat all equally). He revels in the right thing and takes pleasure in compassion.

We don't know

It's one thing to imagine a God up there somewhere who cares about justice and mercy, and quite another thing to live life down here on earth as a human, right? What

does this look like in the flesh? We don't deal in hypothetical possibilities of mercy; we deal with real people. In the public realm, at work, at church, and even within the walls of our own home, we find ourselves asking constantly, "How does mercy apply here? What would it look like if God himself was enmeshed in our complex daily issues?"

Enter Jesus. Jesus comes into our world to save us by his death and resurrection, yes, but he also comes to show us God in our skin. When we look at Jesus, we what God's mercy looks like. When we listen to Jesus, we hear what God's mercy is.

This brings us to our New Testament reading. You think this story is familiar, and it probably is, but I'm always amazed at what's new when I take a closer look. Most of what's new to me in this story is what we don't know. It's such a simple story, yet on closer examination leaves us wanting a little more detail. Let me show you what I mean.

"On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus" (25). What "occasion"? We don't know. Where did this take place? Who else is around during this conversation? We don't know.

Who's this "expert in the law"? We know he studies and probably lectures on the Bible, but we don't know much more. Is he old or young? What's his name? Where's he from? Did he just meet Jesus or has he heard Jesus' sermons and witnessed his miracles? We don't know.

The lawyer "stood up to test Jesus." That's something we know, but what was his motive? Was his "test" hostile or not? We don't know his tone of voice, and we don't know his motive. He could have been a seeker, truly interested in Jesus. He could have been wondering what he and Jesus had in common. Or he could have been one of Jesus' most ardent opponents, trying to embarrass him publicly. We don't know, because the word for "test" can mean any of those things.

"Teacher," the lawyer says to Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (25b) There's something else we do know. His direct question is about eternal life. But why did he ask? We don't know. Most likely he owns a common misconception, maybe even shared by some of you: that you have to do something to get eternal life, that there's some kind of entrance standard.

Jesus answers with a question: "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" (26) Why did Jesus answer that way? Is he being evasive, or is he just trying to establish a connection with the lawyer? We don't know.

The lawyer answers with a summary of the Law that Jesus himself and others before him used. Jewish experts had identified 613 commandments in the Bible, but Legal A-B-C said you could summarize them with two: First, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind," and Second, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (27).

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus says. “Do this, and you will live” (28). So far Jesus and the lawyer seem to be on the same page. If the conversation had ended here, would all the observers have thought, “Well, good. We thought there were problems between Jesus and the religious leaders, but it looks like we’re making progress, folks!” Or is there an uneasy tension in the air? We don’t know.

We do know that the lawyer “wanted to justify himself” (29). This is his “But Mode.” His question sounds like, “*But* who is my neighbor?” Are there not categories of “neighbors”? Do the occupying Roman soldiers count? How about the people who visit pagan temples in Galilee? Tax collectors and prostitutes? The Samaritans, those ethnic and religious half-breeds who lived between Judea and Galilee? Are they all neighbors we must “love”?

So Jesus tells one of his most well-known stories. Since you probably know the story backwards and forwards, let me just remind you what we don’t know.

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers,” Jesus says. We know the descent from Jerusalem to Jericho then and now is about eighteen miles, with a drop of 1800’ in elevation. Today there’s a highway; then there was a winding, rocky path infamously dangerous. Their version of pirates or gangsters made their living pouncing upon unsuspecting travelers.

Who is this traveling man? Is he old or young? Does he have a family? Is he a good man innocently mugged or is he himself one of the crooks, maybe part of a gang? Is he a Jew, a Gentile, or a Samaritan? Why was he traveling alone? Or was he? Did his companions get away? Or were they already dead? We don’t know.

Brigands leave the man naked, beaten, and almost dead. Does he look dead? Does he call out? Does he even realize there are others passing by? We don’t know.

Now a priest comes down the road. “Lucky for the half-dead guy, you think.” But no. The priest sees the wounded man and moves to the other side of the road. But why? Is he in a hurry to get home to Jericho because he promised his wife he’d be there for his daughter’s soccer game? Or is he on the way to Jerusalem to perform his duties in the temple? Why does he not stop? Does he think the man is dead, or so close to dead, that he will risk becoming ritually impure? We don’t know.

A Levite, or temple assistant, then comes down the road. Same result, but again we don’t know anything about him other than his tribe. Is he old or young? Does he know that the law gives exceptions for burying the dead or having mercy on the living? What’s going through his head? We don’t know. But he doesn’t stop to help.

The lawyer, and any other listeners, would naturally have assumed the next person in the story would be a layman. Yup, those priest-types are usually hypocrites, but an ordinary guy will do the right thing. I know what’s coming here.

That's not where Jesus goes with it. Jesus makes the Samaritan the unlikely hero. That's like a post-Civil War southerner encountering a good carpet bagger. Or a Klansman encountering a good black man. Or a Palestinian receiving mercy from a Jew. Who would be an unlikely hero for you? A good Muslim? A Mormon? A Mexican?

The Samaritan administers first aid, lifts the dying man on to his donkey, takes him to the closest inn (which, as you know from the story of Mary and Joseph, often doubled as a stable for travelers), and nurses him personally overnight. When he leaves the next day, he pays enough money for a couple of weeks of lodging while the man regains his strength, and promises more payment if needed.

What happened next? Did the man get well? If he did, was the rest of his life changed? If he had been one of the bad guys, did he repent? Did he lose his prejudice against Samaritans? We don't know.

Why did the Samaritan do what he did? That we know. Jesus draws the answer out of the lawyer. He points out that the lawyer was asking the wrong question. It's not "Who deserves to be called a neighbor?" It's "Who needs neighboring from me?"

Jesus' exact question is, "Which of the three – the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan) do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" (36) The answer is obvious: "The one who had mercy." "Go and do likewise" (37).

What happened to the lawyer? Did he "go and do likewise?" Did he become a follower of Jesus or did he turn away sadly, like the rich young ruler? We don't know.

Who's this about?

We now return to the question with which we started. Does mercy always serve the cause of justice? Is it always the right thing to do the kind thing? Conversely, is withholding from someone in need necessarily the wrong thing?

A homeless woman asks you for money. A man stands at the stop sign with a cardboard appeal, "Will work for food." Your church asks for donations to the Good Samaritan Fund. There's a mission trip coming up – should you go? There's another appeal to adopt a child in Africa. Does mercy always say yes?

What have we learned from Jeremiah and Jesus? Plenty. I'm going to make this simple. Then I'm going to make it complex again.

Here's the simple test. When faced with a request or a need, am I trying to justify myself or am I trying to show mercy? Is this about *me* or is it about *them*?

The reason the parable of the Good Samaritan omits so many details is because Jesus wants us wondering where we fit in the parable. Could I be the wounded man?

Maybe. Could I be the religious guy passing by? Maybe. Am I sometimes the Good Samaritan? Probably.

Probably most often I am the lawyer, wanting to “justify myself” – to find some excuse for why I can’t help. There’s the big question. Tim Keller quotes extensively from a sermon by Jonathan Edwards called “[Duty of Charity to the Poor.](#)” (I hope you don’t judge Edwards by his most famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”) At the end of that very long sermon Edwards lists a number of objections to helping the poor. “They’re not that bad off.” “I’m too busy to get involved.” “I have nothing to spare.” “The poor have questionable character.” “They just don’t know how to manage money.” Which excuse do you use to justify yourself, like the lawyer?

I need to move from “How can I justify my refusal to help?” to “What does mercy look like?” The issue is not how can I get feel better about myself. True, the best way to help is not always to dole out money or create a new program or funnel massive amounts of money. But the best way may involve money.

That’s why the book *Toxic Charity* includes a whole series of tests and ideas to make a real difference. The author is not some armchair theologian. Robert Lupton has given his life to incarnational mercy – living with and among the poor, finding ways to help. His principles include relationship with the poor, empowering the poor to change their own lives and neighborhoods, not doing for the poor what they can do for themselves. All of it includes listening, patience, and mercy.

This takes me back to Jeremiah. Jeremiah’s standard for mercy is God. So let me ask a question so obvious it’s rhetorical. Does God always grant mercy? Does he always give what we think we need? Does God answer all our prayers just because we ask? Of course, no. To be sure, God has a few advantages we don’t have, like omniscience.

Still, the question God models for us is this: “What’s the best for this person?” The Good Samaritan teaches us that on a human level we sometimes need to help when we don’t know. Sometimes God puts a half-dead person in front of us, and it’s rather obvious that the right thing to do is to show mercy without trying to find out what we don’t know. Sometimes emergency assistance throws away all the questions.

Then the question becomes whether I am willing to engage in the messiness of a long term relationship that is more than just a hand out. It’s seeking to alter the underlying causes. If it’s a quick fix, then it’s probably about me – getting this poor person off my back with a buck or two, or making me feel justified in turning my back.

That’s why we’re looking for your ideas on how to engage as a congregation in the kinds of mercy that truly change lives. The truth is that you can’t love God without loving your neighbor. God became one of us and then took on all the consequences of our sins and brokenness in his body and soul. He delights in that kind of mercy. Amen.