

<Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; Luke 6:27-38>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

These readings, especially our gospel reading from Luke, pose a potentially-daunting invitation, because they invite us to do something radical, something revolutionary, and that's always a daunting call. These readings invite us to acknowledge and live into our salvation, but they simultaneously call us to engage in mercy. And mercy is, inherently, a radical and counter-cultural message, one that can be difficult for any of us to accept. But the two are not exclusive, and even that is sometimes difficult to realize and live into.

In the summer of 2006, I had one last requirement to complete in order to be approved "ready to receive a call" in our denomination, which is to say there was only one last preparatory hurdle before I was allowed to talk with churches to be their minister: I had to complete one unit of CPE, which stands for Clinical Pastoral Education. Essentially, it is a regulated program that puts prospective clergy into a setting that requires pastoral care, and pairs it with an intense self-study akin to counseling. In many cases, it can be done in a hospital setting, which was my case; that summer, I spent ten weeks working with the Pastoral Care and Religious Life unit of St. Luke's Episcopal and Texas Children's Hospitals, visiting patients daily, as well as engaging in conversation around my own sense of self and call.

If it sounds intense, that's because it was, and it was designed to be so.

One of the overarching themes of CPE for potential clergy is to develop an understanding of who we are as care-givers, and how that role - which can demand much - co-exists with who we are as individuals. Care-givers, as it turns out, are often excellent at giving care and support to others, and stereotypically horrible at receiving care ourselves.

Now, our role as care-givers was to help frame a patient's story in a sense of hope, an awareness of God's presence, and to look at preparing in a healthy manner for what was to come, regardless of whether that was a return home or in facing death. Our role was to give support, to offer perspective, to support the patient and family. In a sense, it was to be a one-way street.

There's a philosophy that stems from southern African communities, a way of looking at the world that is particularly appropriate in this conversation: the philosophy of *ubuntu*. Essentially, this worldview is summed up in the understanding that the only way I can exist, that I can thrive, is if you thrive, also. And vice-versa; the only way you can thrive is if I do. Ubuntu is often phrased: "I am because you are, and you are because I am." In short, none of us is a rock, none of us is an island, with deep apologies to Simon & Garfunkel.

And this is at the core of the radical, revolutionary invitation of Jesus' words today in Luke's gospel. These words come immediately following our reading of last week, and other than an arbitrary break, there is nothing to interrupt the lesson Jesus is presenting the disciples. Last week we talked about who was blessed and who would know woe, based on their experiences and how they treated others, and wrapped up in that is the calling to align with God's ideals and vision for creation, for humanity, for the Kingdom that is to be realized.

Following in that idea is the understanding introduced today that none of us can exist, none of us can make it, none of us can fully experience salvation in isolation. The only way I can experience the fullness of salvation offered in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ is if you, also, experience it. And vice-versa.

The calling to mercy, then, is not just a practice held as a good idea in Christian faith. Mercy is founded upon the degree to which we hold one another, and others in our community and world, with a sense of value and worth. Mercy is empty if it is not backed up by recognizing the inherent worth in the people who are around us.

During that summer of CPE, one of the floors I was assigned to cover was the transplant floor - patients who were recovering from an organ transplant, waiting to begin their new life, as well as patients who were awaiting a viable transplant, and now needed medical care to survive to that day. One unique aspect of the transplant floor was that many of the patients there awaiting a transplant were there for a long time; as a pastoral care student, I had the opportunity to get to know some of them in a more in-depth manner. One of those patients was Brother Andrew Spates.

I mentioned that, in that summer, I still had a naive view of 'I am the care-giver, and the patient is the recipient of that care.' It was a mindset based on a one-way dynamic. But that approach wasn't going to cut it with Brother Andrew Spates. A firm believer in the gospel, he wasn't about to let me minister to him without taking the opportunity to likewise minister to me. And there are few things as uncomfortable to a care-giver than to receive care, especially from one who is supposed to be your patient.

One afternoon, toward the end of my ten weeks, as I walked into his room he was not going to be deterred. I can't recall what I said, or what we were talking about that gave him the opening, but before I knew it he was preaching to me, the patient providing for the care-giver. "You're worthy, Pastor. Don't ever forget that. You are WORTHY, of all that God has in store for you. You have to own that."

Recognizing the inherent worth in an individual, and even within ourselves, and the radical invitation to not just practice but live into mercy, also demands that we pay attention to how we tell the stories of our lives. And Joseph, from our Genesis reading this morning, gives us a prime example of living out mercy in the way that he tells his story to his brothers.

Remember, Joseph is now a governor in Egypt and oversees the distribution of food surplus in a time of famine. Joseph's brothers, not recognizing him for who he is, have come to ask for food. The same brothers who were jealous of Joseph, who beat him and tossed him in a well, sold him into slavery, and then told their father that he was dead. Joseph could, upon receiving them into an audience, have thrown all of that back in their faces, thrown them into jail, and we would say justifiably so. He could have framed the story through his own experience alone, focusing the story on his worth and how his brothers had demeaned and ignored his value. Joseph easily could have done that, and many of us, myself included, would be tempted to do just that.

But Joseph paid attention to the overall story and was deliberate about how he wanted to continue telling it. Instead, Joseph recognized that his well-being was tied up with that of his brothers and father, and that their well-being was tied up intimately with his. The story Joseph tells is one of radical and unexpected mercy, of connection and community, and of reunification of that which had been separated.

To live into the fullness of mercy, recognizing the worth of self and others, is to embody the fullness of our mutual salvation. The message of the gospel is radical, because it shows us the dynamic that our well-being, our living, and even our salvation is not exclusive to one's own self, only, but is tied up in the well-being, the living, and the salvation of us all.

Chelsey Harmon, of the Center for Excellence in Preaching, puts it this way. "Mercy changes the way we see ourselves and how we see others (which in turn changes the way we act and treat one another). If we are to see ourselves as 'children of the Most High,' then the character of the merciful one will need to be seen in how we live. Mercy flows in the opposite direction of judgement and condemnation; mercy spurts out as forgiveness and generosity."

Mercy is found in recognizing the worth of others and then living and treating each other in such a way.

What is the story you will tell, going forward from this day and time? What will you do to not just practice mercy but to embody it, and to lift up the worth inherent in each person around you, and in yourself? Christ has opened for us the doorway of salvation, but the degree in which we realize that is tied up in how we live together into the fullness of radical mercy. Remember you are worthy, but it is only together that we can live this out for the world. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*