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Houghton Lake United Methodist Church

The Joy of Mercy

Matthew 5:7 and Matthew 25:31-46

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Recently Hollywood released yet another truly awful movie called *Inglorious Bastards*, which played for a week at our own Pines Theatre. I usually try not to comment on a movie unless I have seen it, so in the interest of full disclosure, I have not seen this flick. And I must add that I do not ever want to see it, based on the premise of the story. It is a fantasy about an imaginary group of Jews who torture, terrorize and kill Nazis during the time of the Second World War. In a word, the premise of this movie is revenge. The pagan world craves the sweetness of revenge, the deliciousness of unhinged retaliation, the delight of paying back eye-for-eye and tooth-for-tooth. The pagan world mistakenly believes retaliation is the path to happiness and satisfaction. But this is delusional. How can the inherent logic of inter-personal revenge ever end happily?

Years ago, my neighbor was going through a very angry divorce. Her husband was about to force her out of her house. I met her in the back yard as she was setting it on fire with the leaves she'd raked, as an act of revenge. "What are you doing?" I shouted to her when I saw the spreading flames. She explained it as retaliation against the injustice she was suffering. As the flames crept towards the parsonage grass, I asked her gently, "How is this going to help? How is this going to end happily?"

Injustice and suffering are inevitable in this world; life truly is unfair for all of us, whether you are a dedicated Christian believer or a hostile atheist. But it is not what happens to me in life that matters the most; it is how I react to what happens to me. I can choose my reaction. I can choose revenge and anger, or I can choose to be positive and hopeful. Revenge is our instinct, but showing mercy is always a deliberate choice. That is why mercy is blessed, because when we choose mercy, it is only then that we are truly living in freedom.

Mercy is a word in the Old Testament that is used to speak of God's acts to be faithful with his covenant promises to us. It is not really an emotional reaction to human needs but rather a deliberate choice to keep a promise that was made.

In Numbers 14, the Bible tells us how the people refused to enter the Promised Land because they were afraid. God was incensed with their ingratitude and lack of faith, so he said to Moses, “I will strike them down with a plague...but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they.” (Numbers 14:12)

Moses then responded with a two-point prayer:

1. “Then the Egyptians will hear about it!” (Numbers 14:13). In other words: But God, what will the neighbors think?
2. They will think that...“The Lord was not able to bring these people into the land *he promised them on oath...*” (Numbers 14:16) This is the heart of his prayer.

Moses knew that the only hope for mercy was for God to remember the covenant he made with Israel. Moses did not beg or bargain or promise that the people would do better next time; he appealed to God solely on the basis of the covenant. This is the Biblical definition of mercy. It is like returning something to Wal-Mart. You expect a good outcome, not because you are such a good person, or because you have an honest face, or because you are a personal friend of the clerk at the service desk, but on the basis of your receipt. Your receipt is the covenant.

The Bible tells us that the basis of prayer is God’s covenant of salvation made with us through the blood of Jesus Christ—“all who call upon his name will be saved.” (Romans 10:13) Mercy is the biblical word for God keeping his covenant with us.

Jesus saw himself as the embodiment of God’s mercy in human history. He tells a parable in Matthew 18:23-35 about a king who, taking pity on his servant, canceled his debt and let him go free. This is exactly how Jesus understood his life and ministry. He was the king come to cancel the debts, forgive the sins and set people free through his death on the cross. The parable continues to describe how this newly liberated servant used his freedom to be unmerciful to his debtors. The unmerciful servant was then rounded up and jailed. Jesus concluded, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.” (Matthew 18:35)

The parable proclaims that God has shown us mercy through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. What will we do with that mercy? Will we pass it on or bury it?

Jesus clearly expects those who have received mercy to be merciful. In Matthew 25, he tells us specifically what mercy looks like: to feed the hungry, to give water to the

thirsty, to clothe the naked, to welcome the stranger, to comfort the sick, and to visit those in prison.

Throughout scripture, there is a power principle of mercy. Jesus and Paul say it in many ways: “give and it will be given to you (Luke 6:38)...forgive and you will be forgiven (Luke 6:37)...whatever a man sows so shall he reap (Galatians 6:7)...” To receive God’s mercy is to enter into a virtuous circle—which is the opposite of a vicious cycle. God shows me mercy; I in turn share that mercy with others; then God shows mercy again as those others pass it back to me.

I found a really neat book for my daughter’s birthday at a used book store last summer. I was so proud of myself for picking out something I knew she would like. When she opened it, she just roared with laughter because it was the very book she had given away earlier that year! It is really impossible to give anything away in life. What ever you give away does come back to you. If you give away anger and revenge, it will come back to you—a vicious cycle. If you give away mercy and kindness, it will come back to you—a virtuous circle. God came into the world to get this merciful circle started by giving away his life on the cross in payment for our sins.

So here is God’s prescription for happiness. If you want to be happy, treat other people right. Do not treat them as they deserve; treat them as God has treated you: with mercy, kindness and hope. If you want to change the world, you cannot do it through legislation or education, but rather by changing yourself. You can change yourself by receiving the mercy of God in Jesus Christ as your Savior. Have you done this? I am not asking you if you come to church or sit on committees or help with the dinners. I am asking you if you know the mercy God has shown you in Christ.

Everyone has hidden hurts. Everyone has hidden wounds in their hearts that need to be healed. Out of these hidden wounds come all kinds of negative living: rage, retaliation, selfishness and revenge. Some people nurse these wounds and operate in a constant mode of self-pity. Some people curse these wounds and use them to justify their anger and cynicism. Jesus invites us to take our deepest hurts and immerse them in the mercy of God, so that we might reverse them in a life of noble service to the hungry, the sick, the broken hearted and even the sinner.

Jesus, too, was wounded, not only his head, his hands, his feet and his side, but also his heart—that was his greatest suffering on the cross: to see his own people, even his own friends, turn against him. But he closed up his wounds and ours when he said, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34) When we receive this gift for ourselves, we will pray it over others, and we will be blessed! Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy. Thanks be to God who by his great mercy has given us new birth through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ!