

The Passion of the Psalms: Mercy

July 13, 2008

Year A: Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Camp Norwesca; near Chadron, Nebraska
Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

A six year old began to be disruptive in worship. His father leaned over to ask him to be quite, but the youngster persisted in making noise. Another warning from the father, but again, the child continued to make noise. This time the father reached that invisible line and took the young child in his arms, made his way across the pew all the while the youngster yelling: "Pray for me!" "Pray for me!"¹

Today we have our most gut wrenching topic that comes from this summer sermon series on the Passion of the Psalms. Today we talk about Mercy.

Hymn #562 (Norwesca / Hymn #756 (Sanctuary)

[Psalm 25:1-22 \(NRSV\)](#)

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. ²O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. ³Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

⁴Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. ⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

⁶Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. ⁷Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

⁸Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. ⁹He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. ¹⁰All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

¹¹For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great. ¹²Who are they that fear the LORD? He will teach them the way that they should choose.

¹³They will abide in prosperity, and their children shall possess the land. ¹⁴The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes his covenant known to them. ¹⁵My eyes are ever toward the LORD, for he will pluck my feet out of the net.

¹ "Pray for me." *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part I.* 4.

¹⁶Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.
¹⁷Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distress. ¹⁸Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.
¹⁹Consider how many are my foes, and with what violent hatred they hate me. ²⁰O guard my life, and deliver me; do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you. ²¹May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you.
²²Redeem Israel, O God, out of all its troubles.

Mercy is a concept that needs to be in the church for when I think of the church I think of forgiveness, I think of reconciliation, I think of New Beginnings, I think of the possibility that we get another chance. When I think of the church mercy always is part of the discussion.

Norman Vincent Peale remembers the time when he consulted a woman who sought him out because she was in deep trouble. She worked for an insurance company, and she had been stealing money from the company by falsifying insurance claims. By forging the names of doctors and inventing medical events that never happened, she had swindled the company out of almost fifty thousand dollars. She was terrified that company officials would become suspicious and start an investigation. Remorseful and frightened, she turned to Peale for help.

“Now the woman was a thief,” Peale writes. “No doubt about that. Confession was inevitable. Restitution had to be made.” And yet Peale believed that his own reaction was a bit different from what it might have been just a few years ago. Then he might have reacted mainly with righteous indignation. “You’ve stolen money,” Peale might have said. “We had better go to the authorities right now. Right is right and wrong is wrong. You have stepped over the line and now you must bear the consequences.”

But over time, Peale learned to listen more and judge less. This distracted woman had had a hysterectomy at twenty-six, an early age, thereby losing her capacity ever to become a mother. Peale began to see that her compulsive desire to acquire material things was a pathetic attempt to compensate for the children she could never have. He didn’t excuse what she had done. But he did feel sorry for her.

After talking it over with Ruth, Norman Vincent Peale’s wife, they called a good friend of his in the insurance business, described the case to him, and asked him what he thought the Peale’s and the woman should do. He said that in his opinion, the woman should go to the president of her company, or the highest official she could reach, confess what she had done, and ask for forgiveness and the chance to repay the money bit by bit. “I think they may be fairly lenient with her,” Peale’s friend said. “The sum that seems so large to her is not that large to them. For what you say, this woman is truly sorry and wants to make amends. It may be that the authorities will not have to be brought into it.”

So, they followed that course, and in the end it worked out the way the friend predicted. A young woman who had made a bad mistake was spared a

criminal record because Ruth and Norman had learned to be more tolerant and, as Peale writes: "I hope, more understanding."²

You know when it comes to mercy there is a cute little saying I heard a child once say, A 6-year-old was overheard reciting the Lord's Prayer at a church service. He said, "and forgive us our trash passes as we forgive those who passed trash against us."³

It always takes a child to remind about the message of God. Mercy is just that – forgiveness of that horrible trash we carry around with us. Have you ever thought about some of the aches and pains we have on our body? (Some of us – depending on our age – think about it a little more than others) How much of our pain is contributed by what we can not let go. And I know the older we get the harder it is. I know when I'm under a lot of stress or worry I get a knot right here under my back. I know it's not good on my body. A few years back I asked a question of one of the youth that I worked with. I didn't think much of it at the time, but this youth was also the son of a pastor. I didn't realize that the question actually offended his mom, the pastor, and a few days later I got an email from her questioning my ethics. I first read that email and went into a panic. She threatened to file a complaint against me? I was so panicked by that email that I couldn't think of anything else. That pain in my back started building up and I worried about that little email for weeks. It wasn't until I had a conversation with my Senior Pastor who told me that this pastor had a tendency to over react a lot and not to worry but more importantly to remember that God is a forgiving God that my pain began to go away.

How many of us are in that situation? Maybe it's a headache, a pain in the leg, or in my case my back and we just carry all this trash, all this worry, all this baggage. And folks, when we hurt, we can not reach our full potential. We don't feel like tackling the problem before us because we just don't feel well. And this is why we need mercy, so that we can be released to move in the direction God wants us.

A teacher once told each of her students to bring a clear plastic bag and a large sack of potatoes to school. For every person they refused to forgive in their life's experience, they chose a potato, wrote on it the name and date, and put it in the plastic bag. Some of their bags were quite heavy. They were then told to carry this bag with them everywhere for one week, putting it beside their bed at night, on the car seat by them, next to their desk. The hassle of lugging this burden around with them made it clear what a weight they were carrying spiritually, and how they had to pay attention to it all the time so they would not forget it and leave it in an embarrassing place.

Naturally, the condition of the potatoes deteriorated to a nasty smelly slime. This is a great metaphor for the price we pay for keeping our pain and heavy negativity! Too often we think of forgiveness as a gift to the other person, but it clearly is for us!⁴

² Norman Vincent Peale. "Stole from Insurance company." *Ibid.*, 32.

³ "Forgive us our trash." *Ibid.*, Part II. 44.

⁴ "Potatoes to make us forgive." *Ibid.*, Part I. 10.

Mercy is just that: it lifts our burdens, renews our soul, provides a new lease on life, but more importantly it is just for us when we need it. Mercy is our cry, our plea for the one and only to intercede for us. Mercy here in Psalm 25 is not so much focused on how we act. Mercy is personal, something that gets us to the next day, something that sheds that baggage, and reminds us why we need to turn to God. Why God is so important as the agent to forgive and renew us again for one more day. God is there to say, it's OK, you've done wrong, and they'll probably be consequences, but I forgive you and this is why God loves you.

Going back to this idea that children are the best to remind us of the character of God, listen to this story: There was once a dad who had a three-year-old son named Brandon.

One day, Brandon sees his dad eating chocolate chips cookies in the living room and says to himself, *Daddy loves chocolate chip cookies with milk. So I'm going to give Daddy a glass of milk.* With that thought Brandon goes into the dining room and drags a chair from the dining room into the kitchen, leaving a trail of scratch marks on the floor.

Brandon climbs up on the chair and hitches himself on to the counter to pull at the cabinet door. Wham! It smashes against the adjacent cabinet door, leaving a gash where the handle hit it. Brandon reaches for a glass, accidentally knocking two others off the shelf. Crash! Tinkle, tinkle! But Brandon doesn't care. He's thinking, *I'm going to get Daddy some milk!*

Meanwhile, Brandon's dad is watching all this, wondering if he should step in and save the rest of his kitchen. He decides, for the moment, to watch a little more as Brandon scrambles off the chair, dodging the pieces of broken glass, and heads for the refrigerator.

Pulling violently on the refrigerator door, Brandon flings it wide open - and it stays open, of course. Brandon puts the glass on the floor - out of harm's way, supposedly - and grabs, not the little half gallon of milk, but the big gallon container that is full of milk. He rips open the top, pours it in the vicinity of the glass, and even manages to get some milk in the glass. The rest goes all over the floor.

Finally done, Brandon puts the milk carton on the floor and picks up the glass yelling, "Daddy, I got something for you!" He runs into the living room, trips, and spills milk all over the place - the floor, the sofa, his dad.

Brandon stands up and looks around. He sees broken glass, milk everywhere, cabinets open, his dad with milk from his eyebrows to his toes, and starts to cry. Through his tears, he looks up at his dad with that pained expression that says, "What are you going to do to me?"

His dad only smiles. He doesn't see a kid that just destroyed his house. Instead he sees a beautiful little boy whom he loves very much. It doesn't matter what he's done. Brandon's dad stretches his arms out to hold his little boy tight and says, "I love you!"⁵

⁵ Wayne Rice. *Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks: 100 attention-getting stories, parables, & anecdotes.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: ZondervanPublishingHouse. 1993.) 58.

When I hear that story I think of God because it is only God that would have that much patience and kindness not to get mad at their son with the first crash. When I think of God I think of deity that is watching us trying to do our best to get things right in this world. And look what we do. This week I head to Dallas for the Jurisdictional Conference where we are going to elect Bishops. You would think that this would be easy. Listen to the Holy Spirit and vote the best candidate in. Uh-uh, do you know how much politics goes into each vote? I one time heard a speaker say that if the Holy Spirit were to disappear tomorrow, 90% of the church would still exist.

Or what about those other times we are trying to get this religion thing right and God must be scratching God's head. I one time had a visitor – a new Christian – tell me that his relationship with God was more important than his relationship with his wife and family of many years. I tried telling him not to give up on his family. That they had been there during his wondering years and just because they did not share his conversion experience did not mean he must give up on them.

Folks, we have done some down right awful things in the name of God. The Crusades, wars started over just religion. I have stories of towns where on the weekends the Methodists would not interact with the Lutherans and vice-versa. I've known children disowned because they did not share in the same faith as their parents. God has to be looking at us and thinking, "it's a good thing that I love them and they are trying their best, otherwise this wouldn't be so easy." And folks, that is why I am a firm believer in mercy. I believe God grants us mercy because we are trying our best to get this faith question right and you know sometimes we are going to mess up. Sometimes we are going to hold a grudge and it will weigh on us like trash. Sometimes we will be the church and break things, spill things, hurt some feelings all because we want to give God some of our best. And good thing God grants us mercy otherwise we would be in trouble.

Author and speaker Brennan Manning tells the story of a woman who visited her priest and told him that when she prays, she sees Jesus in a vision.

"He appears to me as real as you are standing here right now, Father," said the woman. "And he speaks to me. He tells me that he loves me and wants to be with me. Do you think I'm crazy?"

"Not at all," replied the priest. "But to make sure it is really Jesus who is visiting you, I want you to ask him a question when he appears to you again. Ask him to tell you the sins that I confessed to him in confession. The come back and tell me what he said."

A few days later the women returned.

"Did you have another vision of Jesus?" the priest inquired of her.

"Yes I did Father," she replied.

"And did you ask him to tell you the sins that I confessed to him while I was in confession?"

"Yes I did," the woman answered.

"and what did he tell you?" asked the priest expectantly.

“He said . . . ‘I forgot.’”⁶

Thank you God! You will get us through another day! Thank you for your mercy! Amen.

⁶ Wayne Rice. *More Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks: 100 MORE attention-getting stories, parables, & anecdotes.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: ZondervanPublishingHouse. 1995.) 27.