

TEXT: Matthew 5:1-12
THEME: Blessed are the merciful
SUBJECT: Mercy
TITLE: Mercy

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
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Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

Originally the beatitudes were intended to startle. St. John Chrysostom, 4th century Bishop of Constantinople, wrote that after hearing the beatitudes, things so grievous and galling, so contrary to the accustomed ways of human beings, the multitudes were astonished.

Simple observation of the world as it is informs us that the rich, not the poor, are blessed; those who are happy, not those who mourn, are blessed; those who have power, not the meek, are blessed; and those who are well treated, not those who are persecuted, are blessed.

So the beatitudes have things backwards. To take them seriously is to call into question our ordinary values. The beatitudes are a long way from religion as a middle class cultural ornament. The beatitudes stand as a challenge to the prosperity gospel.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will [at the last judgment] receive mercy.” Before we proceed, we must acknowledge the eschatological nature of the beatitudes. What does this mean? These words address ordinary circumstances, but seen from the perspective of eternity.

The beatitudes present the will of God in its nakedness, because it proclaims the will of God as it should be lived when God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven. This is why the beatitudes are so radical, why they blast complacency and shallow moralism, disturb every good conscience and instill terror in those who take them seriously. The beatitudes, as is true for the whole of the Sermon on the Mount, are not primarily concerned with what is practical or possible but with the unobstructed, perfect will of God.

The perfect will of God, according to Micah, is that we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly (wisely) with God. What Micah means by “loving kindness” is what Jesus means by “being merciful.”

What is most important from the perspective of eternity, writes Kierkegaard in *Works of Love*, is mercy, that mercifulness be practiced or that the help given is the help of mercifulness. Kierkegaard pushes this to the extreme to make his point. From the perspective of eternity, that a person dies is no misfortune. We all die sooner or later. But it is a misfortune if mercifulness is not practiced.

Kierkegaard imagines the scene, “. . .if only I could depict the expression on the face of Eternity when the rich man answers the question of whether he has been merciful saying, ‘I have given hundreds of thousands to the poor!’ Because, amazed, Eternity will look at him as someone who doesn’t know what he is talking about; and then Eternity will again ask him the question, ‘Have you been merciful?’”

Mercy is not fulfilled through acts of charity, however generous. What Micah means by loving kindness, what Jesus means by mercy, is the ability to get right inside the other person’s skin until we see things with her eyes, feel things with her feelings, and think things with her mind.

Mercy is challenging work. Do I know what it is like to be inside black skin in the United States, in North Carolina, in Winston Salem? Do I know what it is like to be inside the skin of an African American mother grieving for her son, shot dead on his way home from school in the south side of Chicago?

I've read "The Fire Next Time" by James Baldwin and *Between The World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. These books give me glimpses of what life in black skin is like, but does that mean I can see the world African Americans see?

Do I know what life looks like through the eyes of a coal-miner out of work, with no hope for any work that will support his family? Can I see America through the eyes of a Hillbilly whose glory days were in high school, who is now addicted to opioids, who steals his grandmother's social security check to buy drugs?

I've read J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. It is a glimpse into a world that sees no hope in the land where everything is possible. But does that mean I can see life through their eyes?

I cannot imagine what it feels like to be a transgender person in North Carolina. I have no idea what it feels like to look at America through the narrow slit of a burqa. I can't imagine the desperation of Salvadoran parents who fled the slaughter of children who refused to be drug mules, who came to this country to save their children's lives?

As for thinking with the mind of those who see the world differently, whose politics are foreign to me, whose religious perspective is anathema to me . . . well, mercies' work is not for the faint of heart.

I appreciate the lure of metaphysical materialism, the dismissal of any talk of eternity as an expression of an outdated world view. The idea of a final judgment seems the illusion and succor of life's losers. We live in the world of realpolitik, a world governed by power and practical material possibilities rather than according to any morality or notion of human rights.

Three year old refugee boys wash ashore, dead. Girls are sold as sex slaves. Boys strap on suicide vests. Dictators bomb hospitals. Torture works. Rape is the prerogative of the one holding the gun. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for power, for they will rule the earth.

But who wants to live in such a world? Who wants their children and grandchildren to grow up in such a world? A world where a human being has no inherent value, is only a commodity to be bought and sold. A world where life has no inherent meaning, where the truth is abandoned for alternative facts, the good is sacrificed on the altar of ego inflation, and the beautiful is pawned for glamor. As St. John Chrysostom said, "To abandon the beatitudes pronounced by Christ would lead to the ruin of the universe."

Absent mercy the world becomes a theater of the absurd, death the ultimate threat, and power the ultimate value. Blessed are the merciful, for they see the sacredness of each life, of all life. Blessed are the merciful, for they feel the pain of broken hearts and failed dreams. Blessed are the merciful, for they reason with those who think differently. Blessed are the merciful, for they will (at the last judgment) receive mercy.