

"BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL"

March 22, 1987

TEXT: Matthew 5:7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

This morning we continue with our series on the Beatitudes, and specifically with the fifth chapter of Matthew, verse seven: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." At first glance, perhaps, this passage seems less startling than the others, for who of us does not applaud the concept of mercy? We all approve of Portia's famous words in The Merchant of Venice:

"The quality of mercy is not strained;
it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
upon the place beneath: it is twice blest; it
blesseth him that gives and him that takes."

And we can think of few words in the English language more terrible than the word, "merciless." So, as some of you may recall, when the creator of that old-time space hero, Flash Gordon, wanted to paint his villain as the darkest and foulest creature in all the universe, he named him "Ming the Merciless." In theory at least, we are all in favor of mercy.

But, of course, life is not lived in theory. And, when we cross over into the realm of practice, how different things become. Again and again we hear someone say, "I know that I should forgive him, but I just can't." And how often we, ourselves, repeat those merciless proverbs, "He made his bed, let him lie in it", or "If you want to dance, you have to pay the piper." However much we approve of the concept of mercy, it is anything but easy to put into practice.

Some of you, perhaps, may recall a sermon which I preached during my first year here, a sermon entitled, "The High Cost of Loving." It was based upon the story of the Good Samaritan, and it dealt with the price he must have paid in order to show mercy to the man who fell among thieves. What I said then I repeat now. "How easy it is for us to let Jesus' words become little more than cheap platitudes." And what is really a very demanding concept of discipleship we often water down to nothing more than a kind of syrupy admonition to be nice to one another. Yet Jesus was talking about something much more important --and much more difficult.

The quality of mercy may not be strained when it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven, but it certainly strains the dickens out of those who practice it. It was easy enough for

Portia to call for mercy. After all, she was not the injured party. But how much harder it was for Shylock, whose people had suffered from centuries of prejudice and who had just lost a daughter and a fortune to his enemies. And harder still for Jesus to suffer the pain and indignity of the cross. And yet with his last remaining breaths he whispered, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." The mercy of which Jesus spoke, and which he personified, is no mere abstraction. It is one of the hardest and most costly acts of self-denial.

For mercy is something more than just forgiving. And, as difficult and costly as it is to forgive, true mercy is even harder. Both the Greek word, "eleemon", which is used in this Beatitude, and its Hebrew counterpart, "chasid", mean compassion or, better yet, empathy. They mean entering so much into the other person's condition and circumstances that we can see things as he sees them, think as he thinks, and feel as he feels.

Mercy, as Jesus used the word, means a deliberate effort not only to understand other people, but even to share what they are experiencing. And that is something many people never even try to do. Most of us are so concerned about our own feelings that we give little thought to those of others.

That is why we find it so very easy to criticize and so very hard to forgive. When another driver cuts me off at an intersection or darts in front of me to grab the only parking place in sight, from my point of view he or she is a complete jerk. When my children inconvenience or worry me, from my point of view they are totally inconsiderate and unappreciative. It is only when I remember --too rarely I am afraid-- to try to see things from their viewpoint that understanding and compassion are possible. And when I am understanding and compassionate, then forgiving is easy, and perhaps even superfluous.

Now we are getting closer to what Jesus meant by mercy, but we are not there yet. For "mercy", like "righteousness" is a relational word in both the Old and New Testaments, a word which always assumes some kind of covenant association. We are called to be merciful, not just because it is a good and loving thing to do, but because, in the long run, it is the only way that makes sense. A moment ago I spoke about seeing things from the other person's point of view, but even that is not mercy. Mercy, in the Biblical sense, is recognizing that there is really no such thing as an other person.

Mercy is what St. Paul had in mind when he wrote to the church at Rome: "So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." Or his word to the church in Corinth: "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together." Mercy is not just feeling sorry for the other person, or even suffering with him or her. Mercy, is the understanding that there are no others. In the mind of him who taught us to pray, "Our Father" there are no they's and them's. There is only we and us.

If the liver is sick, can you imagine the pancreas saying, "Well, that's too bad, but it's his own fault." Or "Too bad about the liver, but I have my own problems." Of course not! Could you expect the lymph system or the bone marrow to say, "Gee, I really feel sorry for the liver, but, after all, what can I do?" No! When one part of the body is sick, the whole body is sick.

And modern psychology is saying much the same about people. It used to be that when a family member developed emotional problems only that person would be treated. But many times today a different approach is taken. Virginia Satyr, one of the most creative modern psychotherapists, argues that a family behaves as a unit and that, when one member has emotional pain which shows up in symptoms, all family members feel this pain in some fashion. And in her book, Conjoint Family Therapy she concludes that "family therapy must be oriented to the family as a whole. "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together."

Well, Jesus' concept of "mercy" takes that thought one step further. He asserts that humanity, too, is a family, one body in Christ. Now I am certainly not among those who excuse all manner of behavior on the grounds that the perpetrator is culturally deprived and therefore conditioned by society to commit unacceptable acts. Christian theology is built on the foundation of individual responsibility. But I do believe that "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together." And I am convinced that if we are ever to have the kind of world in which we really want to live, we have to learn that when one part of the body of man is sick, the whole body is sick.

Now when one part of an individual's body is sick the whole body responds. Each part does whatever it can to make the sick part whole. And it is the same way with mercy. We remember the Good Samaritan, not because he felt compassion, but because he acted on it. He dropped whatever he was doing and responded to the human need before him. Mercy, like love, is not something we feel, but something we do. To paraphrase the Epistle of James, "What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has mercy, but has not works. If a brother or sister is ill-clad or in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled', without giving them the things needed for the body what does it profit? So mercy by itself, if it has no works, is dead." When Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.", he meant more than just feeling sorry for people. He was talking about doing what the Good Samaritan did, about putting one's own agenda on hold for a while and doing whatever we can to help those in need. And he also said "The measure you give will be the measure you get." (Mark 4:24)

So you see, being merciful is not easy. Nor is it always as lovely as it sounds. Once, when I was living in Kansas, our town was hit by a flood which caused our sewer to back up. We were

having a good bit of trouble when a friend came over with a sledge hammer and a wooden plug. He broke through the cast iron grill that covered the drain and hammered the plug into place. Then, with the back-up stopped, he set to work helping us clean up the mess. And mercy can be like that. Sometimes it means getting down into the sewer water of life and helping a neighbor clean up the mess. It is a hard way, but it is Christ's way. And it ought to be our way, too. For Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Teach us, O Lord, what it means to worship the living God. Bow down our spirits as well as our heads. Grant us reverent hearts and expectant minds that all our worship may be alive and all our life be worship.

Turn our thoughts from ourselves toward Thy Son, Jesus, and fill us with wonder at his life and death and resurrection. And grant us so to live that we may follow his example of service, love, and praise.

Bless, we pray, each of Your children as he or she most needs and hasten the day when all of us may live together as brothers and sisters in Christ. Where there is conflict, let us bring peace. Where there is pain, let us bring comfort. Where there is loneliness, let us bring love. And where there is brokenness of any kind, let us bring healing of body, mind, and spirit.

Help us to be Your church in deed and not only in name. Keep us mindful of the needs of others and help us to meet those need in Christ's spirit of love and service. Both now in our worship together and throughout the days ahead may we bring praise and glory to Your holy name through everything we say and do. For we ask it in Christ's name and in his spirit of love and truth. AMEN.