

## Mercy Within Mercy Within Mercy

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Follen Church

### Reading:

From Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Portia, disguised as a lawyer, is begging for mercy for her lover from Shylock, a Jewish merchant who loaned him money.

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:

'T is mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes  
The throned monarch better than his crown:  
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,  
The attribute to awe and majesty,  
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;

But mercy is above this sceptred sway;  
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings,  
It is an attribute to God himself;  
And earthly power doth then show likest God's  
When mercy seasons justice.

Therefore, Jew,  
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,  
That, in the course of justice, none of us  
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;  
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render  
The deeds of mercy.

I have spoke thus much  
To mitigate the justice of thy plea,  
Which, if thou follow, this strict court of Venice  
Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant  
there.

....

## Sermon

A few months ago I decided I wanted some new professional photos of myself, in my robe and stole, here at the pulpit. So my husband James came over to Follen one afternoon and he took a bunch, like 100, in the hope of catching one that was halfway decent.

Looking through them all later that night, I said to him, “You know, none of these photos really does me justice.”

“Justice!” he said. “You don’t want justice. You want mercy!”

Okay, maybe James didn’t really say that. Maybe that’s an old old joke I found online when I was researching this sermon. But I like it. There’s a kernel of truth.

We all want mercy, especially as we age.

Mercy is our Worship Theme this month, and in preparing this sermon, it’s proven itself to me to be a very slippery concept. What exactly is Mercy? How is it different from kindness or love or justice? How and when and why is mercy our job?

When I think about the flow of Mercy in my life, I keep coming back to one specific day 2 years ago.

I moved here from Wales in January 2016 with my 10-year-old son, Theo, and four suitcases between us.

Looking back on it, it’s not *that* surprising that you all hired me from across the ocean. I was very qualified. What’s more surprising, what I won’t *ever* forget, is what happened afterward. The Full Follen treatment – a tsunami of kindness.

First Rev. Claire and Laura Maltby picked us up at the airport and took us to a friend’s house for the night. We had already found an apartment to rent in Lexington, but there was a snag for the family moving out of it, so we had to wait some time.

Follenites Linda and John Dacey stepped in to the rescue. They were wintering in Florida at the time – and had never met me – but they emailed instructions for us to stay in their lovely home in Waltham for 10 days. Luxury.

Finally, the family was able to move out of our new apartment just hours before our scheduled moving-in day, with no window to clean the place. We moved in anyway. I say “we,” but I did very little of the heavy lifting. It was mostly some Follen men -- Greg Shenstone, David Armstrong, and Andy Dixon. That Saturday morning we met up at a storage place, where Greg

allowed me to choose from his stored furniture. Then he and David and Andy heaved tables and chairs and beds and dressers into a truck that Greg had already rented.

In thick falling snow, the Follen men carried the stuff up my slippery front stairs and arranged it inside the apartment. Then Greg and I went out in the truck again, collecting other donations – a rug from Laura Dickerson’s house, a bean bag chair from Melissa Hawkins, a coffee table and bedding from Howie and Beth Bernstein.

At the same time, some Follen women came by my new apartment that morning, with gifts of food and cleaning supplies. I remember Sally Cassells and Jenny Marshall were there.

By 1pm that day, after a torrent of activity, I had a home, with all the furnishings – beds with sheets, even dishes and silverware. Theo and I had a home. I was exhausted and dumb-founded. And feeling more hopeful than I had been in years. And unspeakably grateful.

The thing I still can’t get my mind around is this. As I said, the family moving out wasn’t able to clean as they left. So the place was pretty grimy, to be honest. It was gross. And while I was out on the truck with Greg, Nancy Sofen had taken it upon herself to clean my bathroom.

We had barely met at that point.

In that moment, Nancy saw a job to be done and she did it. Like she usually does, as I know now. Nancy Sofen scrubbed the grout in that shower for hours, literally, with a toothbrush, until it was white again. Until a person could relax there.

To me that is Mercy. As fine an example as I’ve seen up close in my life. An act of kindness, withholding judgement, for someone in need, without expectation or recognition.

Just because. Because you can.

For me that day, mercy made a home in Lexington. It opened a pathway eventually for my whole family to restart our lives in the US and for me to step fully into my vocation as a UU minister. Your mercy changed my life.

It happens, more often than we know. Most clergy friends I have can speak about how the church has saved them, or someone they loved, from despair. And the transformation was so profound it caused them to commit their lives to the walk of faith.

Mercy. It’s more than kindness. It’s a transcendent kind of kindness. A divine kindness that sparks faith, that opens possibility.

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:

We see many examples of Mercy in the Bible. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God's mercy flows primarily to those who keep his Covenant. For example, God's mercy is invoked to help the Israelites escape from Pharaoh in the Exodus.

In the New Testament, Jesus re-interprets Jewish teachings; he calls us to receive and give mercy without regard to race, class, ethnicity, or perceived misbehavior.

Two examples:

When exorted to love his neighbor, and expert in the law asks Jesus, who is my neighbor? And Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. A priest and a Levite – two holy men – pass by an injured man, dying on the side of the road. But the Samaritan, member of a despised rival group, lifts him up, bandages him, and shows him profound mercy.

And then there's Mary Magdalene. In Luke Chapter 7, Jesus says of her, "I tell you, her sins--and they are many-- have been forgiven, since she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love."

What does that mean?

The 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian mystic Thomas Merton wrote about this passage in Luke: When Jesus forgives Mary's sins, Simon and the Pharisees are shocked and scandalized, for they did not "understand love" and could not "receive the teachings of Jesus about forgiveness." "It does not even occur to them that they themselves need forgiveness," writes Merton, "and since they do not feel any need of mercy, the question of forgiveness and love is a purely abstract one, a canonical question, a matter of jurisdiction." But Mary, who admits her neediness and risks loving, experiences the transforming power of mercy.

Merton's point here is profound. It's only when we have hit bottom, when we have felt our own desperation, that we see the raw humanity in ourselves and so in others. It's then when we become willing both to give mercy to others, and to receive it ourselves, to understand it and be transformed by it.

"Mercy is the thing, the deepest thing that has been revealed to us by God," writes Merton.

"Mercy is at the center of religious experience, a center from which we can understand everything else."

God's mercy frees us to be who we truly are, says Merton. It enables us to overcome our alienation, to see ourselves as we are, to recognize ourselves as "having an inner being in which truth is present."

. . .

For our spiritual exercise this month, we are asked to contemplate that great piece of scripture that was a favorite of MLK. From Micah, chapter 6.

Someone asks the prophet this question, which is really a deeper question about the importance of sacrifice to the ancient Hebrew religion --

“With what shall I come before the LORD,  
and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?  
<sup>7</sup> Will the LORD be pleased with<sup>[a]</sup> thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

No, says Micah.

<sup>8</sup> He has told you, O man, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love mercy,<sup>[b]</sup>  
and to walk humbly with your God

Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly  
I love especially the verbs here. We are expected to DO justice, yes.

But not to **do** mercy, because maybe that's not totally within our power –

But We can certainly **see** mercy and appreciate it and admire it. We can aspire to mercy.

And of course at the same time, we need to walk humbly. Because our justice and our mercy is not ever going to be perfect. It's always going to be human and flawed and messed up. We have got to keep it humble.

I think the passage is saying that it's a delicate always balance between justice and mercy. As in the Shakespeare poem, the two elements belong in tension with one another. Mercy seasons justice.

And justice is first and number one. On behalf of victims and survivors and innocents and the society as a whole, *we must do the hard work of justice first.*

We can't just simply forgive -- that doesn't create justice. Nor can we simply punish. As our current criminal justice system shows us, a punitive approach doesn't work for anyone, except the corporations that profit from prisons.

A restorative approach, however, where the perpetrator is held accountable for damage done and given the chance to make reparations, can work. And it can bring actual healing to all parties. This approach is gaining traction, a little at a time, across the country.

More good news is that just past Wednesday, The Massachusetts Legislature passed the most sweeping reforms to the state's criminal justice system in decades, a package aimed at

- decreasing the number of people caught up in the courts,
- helping those who have served their time stay out of jail,
- and giving young offenders more options to avoid the system altogether.

Now we just have to get Gov. Charlie Baker to sign it. UU Mass Action has put out an alert, asking us to contact Baker's office in support of the bill, and I've put some information up on our Facebook page and in our group if you want to help with that.

Because balancing mercy with justice is what we are called to do, as individuals, as a congregation, as a society.

"We are all broken by something," writes the great contemporary criminal justice advocate Bryan Stevenson. "We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent. And we are all more than the worst thing we've ever done."

He goes on, and sometimes he sounds less like the courtroom lawyer he is and more like the mystic Thomas Merton. "There is a strength, a power even, in understanding brokenness," says Stevenson, "because embracing our brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy. When you experience mercy, you learn things that are hard to learn otherwise. You see things you can't otherwise see; you hear things you can't otherwise hear. You begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us."

Mercy is everywhere, if you let yourself see it and hear it. Thomas Merton saw mercy in the trees, the birds, the sky at night, in all of it.

"[M]ercy is the thing, the deepest thing that has been revealed to us by God," writes Merton. The center of our religious life. Mercy frees us to know the truth deep down in our selves, to connect to our brokenness and to all the other broken and fragile people.

Mercy is actually, according to Merton, the true and only nature of God. Like an onion, god has layers, but when you peel them, they are all the same thing -- Mercy.

God is . . . mercy within mercy within mercy, wrote Thomas Merton.

May you know today the mystery of Mercy, the layers and layers of love that flow through all living things, the love that created you and sustains you and that you now crucially create and sustain and carry forth.

May mercy fall upon you like the gentle rain from heaven and bless you twice, in the giving and the receiving. May mercy flow out from you, in streams now overflowing, now and always.

Amen.

Let us join together in hymn number 299, Make Channels for the Streams of Love