

Sermon Series: The Beatitudes
Matthew 5:1-12
Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 18:21-35

Rev. Dr. Paul H. Thwaite
June 6, 2010
Orchard Lake, Michigan

Cultivating Compassion

Matthew 5: 1-12:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

We are continuing our sermon series on The Beatitudes this morning. Jesus' teaching to his disciples began with a clear description of our need, our brokenness and spiritual poverty both individually and corporately. We are then called to recognize our hunger and thirst for God to meet us and make it all right: to enrich us spiritually through Christ, to renew and restore us and all of creation to the right place God intended all along: harmony with God, one another, ourselves, and the entire creation. These are the characteristics Jesus calls us to reflect on as he now begins to lead us higher and deeper

into the description of who we are called to be as Christ's disciples. Now God begins cultivating the characteristics of Kingdom living in our hearts and lives!

“Blessed are the merciful...” Jesus states in today's beatitude. The dictionary defines mercy as “compassionate treatment of an offender or adversary” or “willingness to spare.” It's the idea of someone not getting treatment they deserve to get based on what they have said or done. Commentator Robert Guelich defines the biblical concept of mercy as 2 things: on the one hand it is pardon offered to one who is in the wrong; on the other it is kindness extended to one who is in need. That matches Micah's call for us to heed God's call to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.” (Micah 6:8) Remigius defined the merciful during the years of the early church as “one who has a sad heart; he counts others' misery as his own, and is as sad at their grief as at his own.” All of these definitions flesh out the thrust of what Jesus is teaching the disciples as they sit at his feet on the mountainside.

These are the things we are called to understand as we see ourselves face to face with God and with each other. First, we must recognize our own plight as sinful human beings – our personal brokenness, misery, inadequacy, and pain. We face our own emptiness and need as we come into the presence of God. We see the misery of the human condition all around us, and we grieve over it and realize we are no better or worse off than anyone else face to face with God. Once we see ourselves in this light, we are ready to receive God's ministry of restoration and renewal as we open our hearts to God's presence. We receive forgiveness and new life. We are restored to right relationship with God and one another. We long for God's rule and restoration to spread throughout all of creation healing brokenness and relieving human misery and pain. We see how God has blessed us and we want those same blessings to be shared and experienced by others.

As we realize these things, we realize we are called to return to others the very same restoration and forgiveness and healing we have received from God. We are to extend the mercy to others we have hungered for ourselves. And so we are called to be merciful and to receive mercy in return – the only one of the Beatitudes where the blessing and the promise in return are identical to one another. Mercy received and mercy extended to others meant to be an unending circle of God’s undeserved favor shared with and for one another. We have already heard a powerful illustration of this dynamic in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in our Matthew 18 reading this morning. A master’s servant who has incurred a debt larger than he could ever repay in his lifetime is called before the master to settle his account. When threatened with he and his entire family and possessions being sold off to pay the debt he pleads for mercy from the master. The master mercifully forgives the entire debt and frees the servant from his obligation to pay altogether – what an amazing act of kindness and mercy, granting pardon to an offender. Yet the same servant, seeing a fellow slave who owes him a small amount in comparison to his huge debt, demands payment at once. When this fellow slave appeals for mercy from the one just set free from his debt, the appeal falls on deaf ears. The recently pardoned slave throws his friend in jail until the debt is paid. When fellow slaves hear of this travesty and report the news to the master who had just showed mercy to him, he calls the slave to account by saying “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?” The question answers itself: Absolutely!! Mercy received is meant to be mercy shared with others. As Dale Bruner puts it “Being a merciful, loving, and forgiving person is not a condition for God’s grace, but it is a necessary consequence.”

In offering this kind of mercy we reflect the nature and character of our God to others. When Moses and God were in dialogue with one another after the Israelites had sinned at Mt. Sinai, Moses was pleading with God to be merciful with his sinful children. God’s

anger was hot at the repeated rebellion of the very ones he had delivered from slavery in Egypt. Would they never learn to trust in God's goodness and blessing in their lives! Moses asks for God's continued favor and grace in leading this rebellious nation to God's Promised Land. Finally God discloses himself to Moses by stating who he truly is: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." (Exodus 34:6) God is merciful, echoed in the phrase "slow to anger" and gracious, echoed in the phrase "abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." On the one hand we have a God who is willing to pardon the offender, to be patient with us in our human condition, and on the other hand he is willing to extend the kindness of his steadfast love and faithfulness to us even though we do not deserve it at all. Where would we be without the mercy and grace of this amazing God?

Preachers are always searching for relevant illustrations to flesh out the principles we are seeking to teach. I am blessed this week to have an illustration of mercy fleshed out for us in the experience of Armando Galarraga, the Detroit Tigers pitcher who pitched – or almost pitched – a perfect game this past week against the Cleveland Indians. For those who are not baseball fans, a perfect game happens when a pitcher is able to get out every batter faced over 9 innings: 27 batters up, 27 outs with no walks or hits or errors. In all of baseball history, this has only happened 20 times, 2 of which have taken place THIS SEASON already! Many of you have heard the story of this week's episode. Galarraga was within one out of a perfect game when the last batter hit a ground ball to the first baseman requiring the pitcher to run over and cover first base. The throw arrived in time and Galarraga touched the bag in time, but umpire Jim Joyce called the runner safe giving him an infield single and ending the perfect game that should have been completed on the play. Seeing the replay after the game, Joyce admitted his mistake had cost Galarraga a perfect game! He was so shaken he didn't know what to do. But Galarraga knew what to do. He extended an attitude of grace and mercy to the offending umpire!

It was amazing to watch the pitcher's reaction. He would have been completely justified in screaming at the umpire's call and complaining about how he had been robbed of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! Instead, let me read you what Galarraga said shortly after the game ended: "He (meaning the umpire, Jim Joyce) feels so bad – really bad. He hasn't even changed out of his uniform. I don't know how to explain how he's going to feel. I'm not the kind of guy who would tell him 'I did my job. Why didn't you do yours? Why didn't you do better in that situation? I understand that nobody's perfect, and it's a hard job.'" Amazing! I don't know of Mr. Galarraga's faith, but his kind of response to an incredibly unfair situation certainly argues in favor of him being a person of faith to some degree. This kind of reaction is not what most human beings would offer. And it is the classic definition of mercy: feeling bad over someone else's pain and offering pardon to an offender. Kudos to Armando Galarraga for offering a modern day parable of what it means to be a merciful person in a tough life situation!

What about us? Who is our offender? Probably not a major league umpire, but nonetheless someone out there who has said or done something to wrong us in some way. We all have someone like that, whether the offense was intentional or unintended. And we all recognize, as we come to the Lord's Table this morning, that we are offenders before God in what we have said and done and in what we have left unsaid or undone. And so we come to the Table of God's mercy: "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Pardon extended to an offender: that's the mercy we receive at this Table today. And that is the mercy we are called to share with those who have offended us or those in need of God's kindness and love shared through us. May God enable us both to receive with gratefulness the mercy shared with us in Christ and to offer to others in gratefulness the same mercy we ourselves have received from Christ. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. May it be so, Lord Jesus.