

Merciful and Whole
Matthew 5:1-8 Crossroads Christian Church
Jeremiah 29:10-14 March 22, 2015; Beatitude series

We've a two-for-one sale today—two Beatitudes in one sermon. Our first Beatitude is "Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy."

Mercy is a wonderful trait, because it helps both giver and receiver; but more important, it is a glimpse into the nature of God. If God's justice reigned supreme, what chance would we have? But God is merciful, and that mercy saves us.

We often think of the Old Testament God as a God of judgment, a God who punishes those who don't toe the line, a God of vengeance. But that's a stereotyped, cardboard cutout. A term that the Old Testament uses to describe God over and over again is *hesed*—sometimes translated mercy; sometimes loving kindness; sometimes compassion.

Mary Donovan Turner, a Disciples Old Testament scholar, describes *hesed* this way: 'This God of steadfast love (sometimes translated mercy or compassion) is alive and well in OT narrative and song. God gives this kind of love. God sends it, remembers it, continues it, shows it, causes it, makes it great, keeps it, satisfies it, and surrounds it. [God's] love is with the worshiper. God delights in it. This is the kind of love that sees us through weakness, confusion, complaint, temptation, sin and defeat. It is the love that indwells in the human spirit, inspires hope and courage, and enables us to be faithful.'¹(unquote)

Jesus was in that prophetic tradition, and he invited his followers then, and invites us, his followers now, to be merciful, to be caring of others, to be forgiving. Jesus, in the Lord's Prayer, connects our showing of mercy to our receiving of mercy when we pray that God will forgive our debts as we forgive those who owe us debts. What goes around comes around.

Mercy is having the imagination and sympathy to deeply feel another's misery, and the will to act on it, the will to make a difference. I can feel my heart moved when I'm watching a sad movie or a documentary about people suffering from poverty or violence. I can feel sorry for a street person carrying all her possessions in a black plastic bag in an old grocery cart. But if I don't do anything about it, if I find excuses to not respond, I'm not showing mercy. Our Week of Compassion offerings and loose change offerings are one way of

¹ Turner, *Old Testament Words* (Chalice), p. 62.

showing mercy. Making a point to stop and visit and listen to someone who is lonely or ill is another. Writing our representatives to vote on bills that help poor people in need is another. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Remember when Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, when the most unlikely person possible stopped to help a wounded traveler? Who was the neighbor? The one who showed mercy.

All of the beatitudes have special power when we see in them a reflection of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ came to show us the merciful face of God. He came to a needy and hurting world, a world of suspicion and violence, a world of quick judgment and oppression, and lived out a life of mercy. He forgave sinners. He healed the sick. Compassion and mercy were writ large upon his face. He saw the people as sheep without a shepherd, and had compassion on them.

Today we live in a needy and hurting world, a world of suspicion and violence, a world of quick judgment and oppression. Do others see in us a reflection of Christ's mercy? We are children of a merciful God. Do others see in our mercy, a reflection of our heavenly Father?

Now let's move on to our second Beatitude, Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God.

What do you think it means to be pure in heart? What do you think it means to see God?

Jesus might have had in mind the words of Jeremiah the prophet, who had said,

"When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart." When Jeremiah said that, the leaders of his nation were going to be marched off into exile in a far and distant land. The temple of God would be demolished. Would they be able to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? Jeremiah's answer was yes—if you sought God out wholeheartedly, you would find God's presence wherever you are. That's a wonderful promise, isn't it? If you really want to find God, God will be there. St. Augustine even made God's role in the process more active, like the father of the prodigal son who rushed out to meet the weary and defeated young man. Augustine said, "I searched for you and searched for you, and you found me."

In a way, though, purity of heart is the most daunting, the most challenging of the Beatitudes. Don't we all have mixed motives? Aren't we all tempted to do the right thing for the wrong reason? Don't we all have moments of weakness and selfishness and insecurity and lust that leads us away from wanting to do God's will? St. Paul certainly thought so. He tried to find salvation through obedience to the law, but the law, which had been designed to lead people toward a holy and pure life, had become to him an obstacle to finding God rather than a path to finding God. He struggled with a guilty conscience. "I do

not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." He discovered that by his own efforts he could never be pure hearted. But by accepting God's grace in Jesus Christ, he received the pure heart for which he had yearned.

Being pure hearted isn't something we achieve on our own moral virtue, it's a gift that God gives us when we ask. It means having a purified heart, which means altering your priorities so God is first on your list. Our heart is the core of our being, our will, our motives, our thoughts.

Purity of heart has a lot to do with integrity—integrity means being honest with yourself and others, refusing to believe one way and act or speak another. It's from a Latin word that means One. Psychologists talk about having an integrated personality as a goal in life, one where you have a central core value that everything else is wrapped around. The opposite of integrity is being at war within yourself, being pulled in different directions by your own desires, fears, hidden motives. Instead of integration, it's dis-integration, emotional fragmentation. When we're praying "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," we're also praying, "let your will be done in us. Let your will be our will."

Jesus had this unified, united, devoted spirit. We remember how Jesus was tempted at the very beginning of his ministry. The outer wilderness, dry, desert, barren, helped him focus on his inner struggle with conflicting thoughts and feelings. Hungry? Turn a stone to a loaf of bread. Anxious that people wouldn't hear your message? Jump from the top of the temple and let the angels catch you. Not sure what path to follow? Follow me, and you can rule the world. Jesus was tempted to accept selfish motives and resort to unworthy acts. But he had integrity, a singleness of purpose, a purity of heart, because he centered his will with his heavenly Father's. Later, Jesus would say, "Doing my Father's will is my food and drink," and he lived that way. People were amazed at him because he so loved God that he wasn't afraid of anything or anybody. "He doesn't speak as the scribes or Pharisees, but as one with authority." That authority came from integrity. He wasn't afraid to speak the truth, or to stand up to opposition, even to go to the cross, because his will was aligned so closely with God's will. And when he knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed, "Father, if you will, take this cup away from me. But nevertheless, not my will but yours be done."

In our own lives, it's a struggle to be pure-hearted, for getting it together, because the world tries to pull us this way and that. TV ads scream for our attention and our allegiance. Ideologies try to offer us a framework where we no longer have to make tough decisions for ourselves. Our own fears and lack of faith make us all too willing to

cave in under pressure, to go with the flow. The good news is that we don't have to do it for ourselves. We can ask God's help. But think of the promise of this Beatitude. As we become integrated, pure-hearted, then it is that we can see God. We know God's presence. We realize the joy that comes when we live in God's love. We have looked into the face of God, and have seen Jesus, have seen a friend. We are blessed.

By Michael E. Dixon