

June 11, 2023
“Mercy, Mercy Me”
Hosea 5:15-6:6 / Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Woah, ah, mercy, mercy me

Ah, things ain't what they used to be

You surely know Marvin Gaye's classic, “Mercy, Mercy Me (The Ecology)” – released the year before I was born, 1971, as part of one of the greatest albums ever recorded, *What's Going On?* The song written by Gaye himself as a sorrowful anthem about the increasing disregard for and destruction of the environment.

Consider how the song begins, especially in light of this week's unprecedented air quality alerts resulting from forest fires in Nova Scotia. 700 miles away. Fires primarily caused by human activity, but fueled by climate change.

Woah, ah, mercy, mercy me
Ah, things ain't what they used to be
Where did all the blue skies go?
Poison is the wind that blows
From the north and south and east

Mercy, mercy me. As an expression, it's dated at this point – not one we often hear to express alarm.

But we look at the world around us, a world so desperately broken, marked by fossil-fuel dependence and climate change, by state-sanctioned war and violence, by gun violence, by poverty and income inequality, by racism and sexism, by homophobia and transphobia, by toxic masculinity, by fragile democracy, by a raging war on truth itself – and we are left to say only, “Mercy, mercy us.”

In her book, *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy*, Anne Lamott faces such alarm by turning to the prophet Micah – namely, Micah's poignant, reverberating summary of the Divine path: “God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Holy One require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness (or mercy), and to walk humbly with your God?”

For Micah, that's it in a nutshell. The way to respond to alarm about the tragic state of the world or the precarious state of our lives is to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God.

And Lamott homes in on mercy as the place to start. In fact, she describes mercy as foundational and innate – the way we all are before the world knocks it out of us. The way we all are as children, before we are – as she writes, “so often rattled by the lingering effects of trauma and paralyzing fear.” Whether we realize it or not.

“I came into this world,” she goes on, “with mercy for nearly everyone, everywhere, and for all cats and dogs at the pound. A lot of good it did me. By five years old, I had migraines and the first signs of OCD. By about age six, along with innocence and wonder and truth, I put away childish things. They said to, the people in charge of keeping me alive. I did. My parents, teachers and the culture I grew up in showed me a drawer in which to stuff my merciful nature, because mercy made me look vulnerable and foolish, it made me less productive.”

And so mercy, along with its cousins forgiveness, grace, kindness, compassion, love, is always the right place to start. The side on which to err.

And so says Jesus in our gospel reading this morning. He invites Matthew to follow him; the despised tax collector is sitting in his tax booth, busy at work, but up and away he goes. Like all the other disciples on a course to follow who knows where – and like the other disciples, quick to drop everything and follow because, deep down, he knows there has to be a better way than the way he's known. Than the way things are.

And so, with Matthew's call, begins Jesus' ongoing feud with the Pharisees, with the teachers and guardians of Mosaic Law. After sharing a meal with Matthew and a bunch of other tax collectors and “sinners,” the Pharisees take issue. Eating with those who are in clear violation of the Law. The unrighteous.

But Jesus starts with mercy, errs on the side of mercy. “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” Not the righteous, or at least self-righteous, he

says, but sinners. Those, right, who are DISCONNECTED – from God, from themselves, from each other. From love of God, of themselves, of each other.

Jesus is all about connecting and re-connecting. And if you pay attention to the long arc of his life and teaching, or even just to the arc of your own life, you know that we are all “sinners” in need of re-connection. In search of wellness. And healing. And wholeness. Amen? Amen.

Jesus blurs the lines the Pharisees and the rest of us like to draw between sinner and saint. Between guilty and innocent.

And once we are re-oriented to our rightful place among so-called sinners, imperfect human beings all, Jesus cuts to the chase: “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”

Point those fingers, Pharisees, throw shade all you want, but come back to me when you have learned what it means that God desires mercy, not sacrifice. That is your homework until next time.

That is our homework, the question before each of us, all of us. EVERY SINGLE DAY. Within the ebbs and flows, the small choices and big decisions, of every single day.

What does it mean, as Micah insists, that God requires, above all else, justice, mercy and humility? What does it mean that God desires mercy, not sacrifice.

Jesus is quoting from the prophet Hosea in this case, from our other reading this morning: “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

And the sacrifice referenced here, of course, referring to the ancient ritualistic practice of burnt offerings to avoid God's perceived wrath and obtain God's perceived favor. Animals sacrificed in ritual observance of the Law, sometimes literally scapegoats for one's own – or a community's own – sin.

The ritual of offering such prescribed sacrifices required the acknowledgment of sin, of disconnection.

The tension between mercy and sacrifice is the tension between the spirit and letter of the Law – as Jesus will also go on to emphasize in arguing that he came not to abolish, but to fulfill, the Law.

The Law may say sacrifice, but the spirit says mercy. Mercy directed to others, and mercy directed to ourselves – when, as Amy reflected a couple of weeks ago, we are our own worst enemies.

In withholding mercy – individually and collectively – from others, individually and collectively, those we know AND those we don't, we end up instead sacrificing others at the altars of fear, hatred, greed, ego, self-righteousness, pride, arrogance, privilege, freedom, meritocracy, othering, judgment, vengeance, violence. Capitalism, racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism. And on and on and on.

In withholding mercy from ourselves, we end up sacrificing ourselves at the altars of shame, guilt, inferiority, self-loathing, fear of judgment, fear of conflict, fear of violence. And on and on and on.

That is the challenge as Anne Lamott describes it, how to overcome our own trauma and fear enough to risk mercy. How to soften our own hearts enough to risk mercy – for the sake of others' well-being and for our own, broken as we are and broken as the world is.

Mercy, mercy me. Mercy, mercy us. Mercy is our best shot.

In her book, Lamott lifts up as a metaphor the ancient Chinese practice of highlighting the cracked parts of valued possessions with gold leaf. Picture it: a stunning metaphor for mercy, for ourselves, for each other, where the gold leaf becomes part of our beauty. The cracks themselves, so adorned, become part of our beauty.

Not perfect, but well.

That is mercy.

“Mercy,” she writes, “is radical kindness. Mercy means offering or being offered aid in desperate straits. Mercy is not deserved. It involves absolving the unabsolvable, forgiving the unforgivable. Mercy brings us to the miracle of apology, given and accepted, to unashamed humility when we have erred or forgotten.”

“Mercy (is the approach) we might consider taking when facing a great big mess, especially the great big mess of ourselves—our arrogance, greed, poverty, disease, prejudice. It includes everything out there that just makes us sick and makes us want to turn away, the idea of accepting life as it presents itself and doing goodness anyway, the belief that love and caring are marbled even into the worst life has to offer.”

The assignment that Jesus gives and that Lamott reiterates, is to reacquaint ourselves with mercy. To dig out and dust off the merciful natures with which we were born, from whatever drawers they've been hiding in.

And to remember that in an unsettling world marked by fear and disconnection, by so many questions, it is mercy, radical kindness, grace, forgiveness, compassion and ultimately, love, that will provide the answers for which we are all looking.

Having faith in that divine truth is what makes us well. As with the leader of the synagogue whose daughter is dead, but whom Jesus suggest was just sleeping in bringing her back to life.

And the woman long-suffering from hemorrhages, whose faith compels her to believe – against the pile of good reasons not to – that she will be healed by simply touching Jesus' cloak.

“Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well.”

Faith in the power of mercy to heal, and with it, the conviction to open our lives and our hearts to mercy. To start with mercy. To err on the side of mercy, as Jesus did.

That is what our broken selves and our broken world need more than anything else. Mercy that is, as Lamott puts it, “the fragrance that the rose leaves on the heel that crushes it.”

She says, and I’m quoting again here, “I’m not sure I even recognize the ever-presence of mercy anymore, the divine and the human; the messy, crippled, transforming, heartbreaking, lovely, devastating presence of mercy. But I have come to believe that I am starving to death for it, and my world is, too.”

May that deep hunger be satisfied in and for each of us, in and for all of us.

May we, like Lamott and inspired by Candi Stanton’s gospel song, say ‘Hallelujah anyway’ in spite of all the reasons not to.

May we, in the words of Hosea, “press on to know the Holy One;” trusting that “God’s appearing is as sure as the dawn;” and that “God will come to use like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth.”

And may we, finally, take to heart the words of Shakespeare’s Portia, from *The Merchant of Venice* – she disguised as a lawyer in making the case for mercy:

*The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed—
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.
His scepter 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 sceptered sway.
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute to God ...
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, ...
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.*

“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”

May it be so.