

“A MEDITATION ON MERCY”
A sermon by the Rev. Roger Bertschausen
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
2600 E. Philip Ln.
P.O. Box 1791
Appleton, WI 54912-1791
(920) 731-0849
Website: www.fvuuf.org

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Call to Gather: Reading #702, attributed to St. Francis
Where hate rules, let us bring love;
where sorrow, joy.

Let us strive more to comfort others than to be comforted,
to understand others than to be understood,
to love others more than to be loved.

For it is in giving that we receive,
and in pardoning that we are pardoned.¹

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

From *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare
The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
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:
'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 sceptred sway;
It is enthroned 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.²

Sermon

The roots of this sermon lie in last winter's sermon series on the spirituality of film. In the sermon called "A Meditation on Vengeance," I focused on the Steven Spielberg film

¹ Reading #702 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

² <http://www.cs.rice.edu/~ssiyer/minstrels/poems/1501.html>.

Munich. *Munich* is an incredibly difficult, important movie that packs a powerful punch. The focus is the horrific and seemingly endless cycles of vengeance and violence in which humanity continues to be mired. *Munich* ostensibly is about the massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics and Israel's subsequent efforts to exact revenge on those believed to be responsible. This effort, a classic attempt to exact eye-for-an-eye justice, is in essence state-sponsored vengeance. More than anything, the movie paints a devastating portrait of how the Israeli secret agents assigned to assassinate the alleged perpetrators slowly lose their own souls, one assassination at a time. They slowly figure out that, in the words of one of the team, an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.

As I shared in the sermon last winter, the movie's final scene wrenches the drama out of the 1970s and puts it squarely in the here and now. Strolling along the banks of the Hudson River across from New York City, one of the members of the team of assassins explains to his boss why he has quit the team and left Israel. He has concluded that his work is accomplishing nothing more than fueling the unending cycle of violence. As he walks away from his boss, the camera shifts to the city skyline in the background. We can see clearly the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. The image connects today's cycle of violence with the cycle of violence depicted in the movie.

Munich is a counter-cultural movie. One of the guiding myths in our culture today is that when used against evil, vengeance and violence can be redemptive. This theme is just about omnipresent in contemporary films, television, and video games. One can argue that in recent years it has even become the basis of our foreign policy. *Munich* poses a devastating challenge to this myth. So, I would add, do the life and teachings of Jesus, the Buddha, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Aung San Suu Kyi, and every prophet of peace.

In thinking about *Munich* last winter, I thought a lot about what might be the opposite of vengeance. Words like love, compassion and forgiveness come to mind. Perhaps an even better opposite of vengeance is "mercy." I decided then that I would one day do a sermon on mercy. So today's sermon, "A Meditation on Mercy," is the book-end to "A Meditation on Vengeance."

I find mercy to be a difficult concept to get a handle on. My dictionary's primary definition of mercy is: "Refraining from inflicting punishment or pain on an offender or enemy, etc. who is in one's power."³ I think this is a pretty good definition. But let's fill it out a bit. My wife defines mercy as a tempering of our desire for revenge and justice. This definition lifts up that when we are merciful, we set aside our desire for revenge. We set aside even our desire that the person be brought to some sort of justice. Mercy is a kind of letting go and letting be.

Mercy is present in Hinduism and Buddhism, and it is a central concept in the three great monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In each of these monotheistic faiths, God is the ultimate dispenser of mercy. As the fourteenth century Christian mystic Julian of Norwich suggests, mercy lies at the very heart of God.⁴ Part of our job as humans is to try our best to imitate the mercy of God.

But since we are imperfect beings and not God, mercy is not at all an easy thing to practice. Vengeance is so much easier—at least in the short run. Think of a time that

³ *Oxford American Dictionary* (New York: Avon Books, 1980), p. 556.

⁴ Elaine M. Prevallet, "Living in the Mercy," *Weavings* vol. XV(5), September/October 2000, p. 8.

you have been deeply hurt by someone else, or watched a loved one get hurt. Can you remember that feeling of wrath rise up from your gut? In most of us, feelings of mercy don't rise up quite so readily. Mercy takes effort, attentiveness, and persistence. It takes acting contrary to some of our basic instincts.

I don't know about you, but using words to describe mercy is of only limited help. I see better in pictures than in words. So I have several pictures of mercy I want to share.

The first picture comes from the movie *The River*.⁵ This film came out in 1984 and starred Mel Gibson and Sissy Spacek as Tom and Mae Garvey. The Garveys own a farm on the banks of a river in Tennessee. The farm has been in Tom's family for generations. Many of his ancestors are buried on the land.

Like so many family farmers then and now, Tom and Mae struggle to make ends meet. They battle against the raging waters of the river that periodically threaten to swamp their farm. But the even bigger challenge comes from an unscrupulous, wealthy man in town named Wade. He wants to force them and a lot of their neighbors off the land so he can build a hydroelectric dam. Tom is determined not to leave the farm. As he tells Wade, "I ain't leaving except in a box."

Financially squeezed by the flooding river and Wade, in desperation Tom takes a temporary job at a factory in a distant town. Only when he arrives at the factory gate in a truck with other workers does he realize that he has been hired as a scab. Picketers attack the truck as the truck drives through the frenzied crowd up to the factory gate. Once inside, Tom and the other scabs are as locked inside the factory complex as the striking workers are locked out. Management takes advantage of having a captive labor force and exploits the scab workers.

One day, a solitary deer wanders into the factory from the fields outside. The workers chase the deer and eventually corner it. In the eyes of the encircling crowd, you can see the accumulated wrath, now completely focused on the poor deer. Though the deer obviously has not offended the men, it is a perfect and non-threatening recipient of the pent up wrath toward the striking workers and the exploitative factory owners. Made to bear the blame and the vengeance desired against others, the deer is a classic scapegoat.

For several seconds the encircling workers and the deer look at each other. Petrified, the deer urinates. The men move closer, and I brace myself for the deer's brutal demise. But looking into the deer's fearful eyes has somehow changed the men's hearts. Without saying a word, they lay down the easy weapon of wrath and instead pick up mercy. They come closer to the deer. As one, they gently move the deer toward an exit door. Once outside, they open up the circle and let it run away.

The very next scene presents a variation on the same theme of mercy. The foreman at the factory announces to the workers that the strike has been settled. He tells them that as quickly as possible they need to pick up their final paycheck, gather their belongings and leave. As the men gather by the factory gate, the angry picketers still gathered outside the gate, it dawns on scab workers that no truck is there to take them safely through the crowd. They will have to walk. The foreman informs them that is part of the labor settlement. The scabs hesitate a moment, but then are pushed through the gate by the same armed police officers who earlier had kept the picketers out.

⁵ *The River* directed by Mark Rydell, 1984.

As Tom and the other scabs walk through the gates, many in the crowd tap clubs and sticks menacingly in their hands. The crowd encircles the scabs and moves in toward them. The scabs are now as helpless as the deer was when they surrounded it. The camera lingers on the eyes of the picketers and the scabs staring at each other. You can see the hatred in the picketers' eyes, and fear in the scabs'. But then another emotion is superimposed on the hatred in the picketers' eyes. Maybe it's pity. Or maybe it's the realization that the scabs are desperate people just like they are. It's hard to know for sure.

Without words, the picketers create an opening in the circle through which the scabs can exit. This act of mercy doesn't extinguish the hatred and wrath: you can still see that in the picketers' eyes, too. Many continue to tap their clubs and sticks. Some hurl insults; some spit on the scabs. One woman spits right on Tom's face. Tom thinks about responding in kind, but something softens in his eyes as he looks at the woman. He and the others resist the instinctual urge to spit back (or worse). Miraculously there is no physical violence. Mercy has somehow triumphed.

A little later Tom and his family are again fighting the raging floodwaters of the river in the climatic scene of the movie. Overwhelmed by the rising waters, they recruit other farmers to help them build up the levee against the river. Wade, the man who wants to force Tom and his family off the farm, shows up with homeless squatters he's hired and starts to destroy the levee. Tom has his son fetch his shotgun. Tom points the shotgun at Wade and puts his finger on the trigger. For a long moment, he looks into Wade's eyes. Then he puts the gun down and instead grabs a sandbag and begins filling in the breach Wade's men caused. Everybody, including Wade's hired, men starts helping Tom. Though he clearly hasn't given up on forcing Tom out, even Wade puts a sandbag in the breach. For the moment at least, mercy has again won out.

Here's one more picture of mercy. This one is from my own life. One evening during a visit to Paris several years ago, my wife, brother-in-law, sister-in-law and I had just finished eating dinner at a restaurant. We were staying at their apartment in Paris. It had been a wild day because many government workers had gone on strike. Much of the public transit system was idled. As the day ended and people sought to return home from work, the streets became a nightmare of gridlock. It was so bad that many drivers simply left their cars in the middle of the street because they couldn't move. This didn't exactly help relieve the gridlock!

By the time we finished dinner at a characteristically Parisian late hour, traffic had finally begun to move. At one busy intersection we encountered an agitated woman who was asking loudly for something. I didn't have a clue what she was yelling about—not surprising since I don't know a lot of French. But it seemed like my in-laws didn't understand her either. Now I did what I usually do when I encounter such people in big cities: I averted my eyes. I assumed she was mentally ill or a panhandler or both. I think my brother-in-law and sister-in-law did the same thing.

But then something in my brother-in-law made him turn back. He talked with her. He looked her in the eye. He took the time to hear her story. I think my sister-in-law turned back, too, and joined in the conversation. It turns out that she suffers from cerebral palsy. Because of the strike, she had been struggling home from work on foot for many hours. Exhausted and frazzled, she was simply not able to cross the busy street; she couldn't get across the street quickly enough. So my brother-in-law stopped traffic

long enough for her to cross the street. By this time traffic was finally moving enough that cabs had ventured back onto the streets, so he was then able to hail a cab for her.

My brother-in-law and sister-in-law showed mercy to this woman. Now this woman hadn't committed any offense against them or me. But we had initially projected an offense onto her: the offense of acting crazily and/or asking for money. The prerequisite to showing mercy was letting go of these projections and looking her in the eye. Only then were my in-laws able to show their mercy and compassion. I wonder: how many people have I not looked in the eye? How many people have I written off in the same way I wrote off this woman?

These pictures of mercy suggest ways to cultivate mercy. First and foremost is recognizing the common humanity and connection we share with others. In each of these pictures of mercy, there was an unexpected moment of looking into the eyes of the perceived offender. This didn't necessarily dispel feelings of offense or wrath, but at the least it caused a flicker of empathy to enter into the emotional mix. And this caused hearts and minds to open up at least a little bit. This is precisely the opening that mercy needs. Judgments, preconceptions and assumptions, on the other hand, close our minds and hearts. They cause us to see other people as foreign, different, other. And then mercy is not possible.

There are other important ways to cultivate mercy. One is to let go of our desire for exact, retributive justice. The quest for such justice is part of what fuels never-ending cycles of violence like that which we see between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Another way to cultivate mercy is to let go of righteous certainty about the justice of the causes we support. In the place of righteousness, we must embrace humility and acknowledge the possibility that we're wrong. Related to this, we need to realize that we commit offenses, too. Mercy also requires that we never completely give up on someone.⁶ I believe this is true even of a killer on death row: here's where mercy can get hard. This is one reason I oppose the death penalty, even when it is totally clear that an inmate is guilty of a most heinous crime.

Yes, mercy is hard. But there is plenty to be gained from being merciful. It certainly breeds greater peace within the soul. The spiritual writer Elaine Prevallet captures the impact of mercy on our inner lives. When we are merciful, she writes, we

instinctively and effortlessly provide gracious, warm, and comfortable space around us that is ready to receive and welcome persons as they are. A kind of spaciousness (characterizes) us...allowing a person to be free to be herself, subtly eliciting what is best from another, allowing her to "flower from within." Mercy makes our hearts spacious; it also mercies the space around us. Mercy becomes the space we live in.⁷

Finally, I have to add that as Jesus and Shakespeare both expressed in the readings and *The River* depicted, mercy is something that often comes back to us in spades. There is a kind of karma to mercy. It is not necessarily exact or always so, but in general when we act merciful to others, we do increase the odds of other people acting merciful towards us.

⁶ James McGinnis, "Mercy in Hard Times and Places," *Weavings*, vol. XV (5), p. 28.

⁷ Prevallet, p. 11.

And maybe most of importantly of all, mercy puts a stop to the revolving door of violence that goes round and round and round. Attacking the perpetrators of the latest atrocity never finally stops the revolving door. We humans continue to prove this over and over again. Maybe it is time to give mercy a chance.

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