



Blessed are the Merciful

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 5:2-7
Matthew 18:23-35

March 14, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who know in every moment their dependence upon God. Blessed are the broken hearted, those who love so deeply that they know heartbreak. Blessed are those whose desire for righteousness is like thirst needing to be quenched. And blessed are the merciful.

If there is a Beatitude that makes sense, that is not so world-turned-upside-down, it's this one, isn't it? Doesn't everyone think that showing mercy is a good thing? At least when we receive mercy. But extending mercy to others? When they don't deserve it? Hmm.

Jesus tells the story of the man who owes his master ten-thousand talents. Tom Long says ten-thousand talents is like a bazillion dollars.¹ It's so much money that Jesus' followers would have laughed out loud. No one can be that much in debt. It is an unpayable debt. But the comedy continues because even though the debt is unpayable, the slave promises, "I'm good for it. I'll pay it all to the last penny. Just show a little patience, a little trust in your neighbor." The master knows this is not possible. So, not because he expects to get what's his, but out of mercy, the master forgives the debt of a lifetime.

Oh, this servant, he owed it... but he receives not what he deserves, but mercy.

But seemingly, in the next moment, the forgiven servant meets another servant who owes him not a bazillion dollars, but lunch money. "Pay me what you owes me," he says. And as if this second servant has the exact same speechwriter as the first, he repeats: "have patience with me and I will pay you." This worked with the master, but not the servant. The forgiven servant refuses to show forgiveness and

off to debtor's prison his fellow servant goes.

What this servant does is legal—you can't just get away with anything. Some might say what he does is smart—he was owed the money. But what he does is not blessed. It's not holy because it's not merciful.

The thing about mercy, if it is extended to you, it means you do not get what you deserve. We know we often don't get what we deserve, but usually when we say that, we mean life owes more than we have received. And often it does. People get sick and they don't deserve that. Life brings bad breaks—sometimes through no fault of our own. Life is unfair. We hate that.

But mercy has an unfairness to it. Mercy means we don't get what we deserve. And it's not easy when people don't get what's coming to them—when they get off the hook. Sometimes it's hard to know if we are bothered more by innocent folks facing unfair problems or guilty folks getting off without paying their due.

But Jesus says to show mercy in the moment when people need mercy is blessed. Jesus says those who show mercy will also receive mercy. You can trust that we will receive mercy, because the truth is, we already have. At the heart of this Beatitude is this question: Do you believe God is merciful?

Is life a scale on which all blessings are rewards for good behavior, and all troubles are punishments for bad behavior? Or is life a collection of moments and circumstances, a network of relationships and connections, an avenue to use gifts which have been bestowed upon you?

If life is a calculation of earned worth, then build your own life. But life is really the first taste of salvation, the greatest gift from a gracious God. God has

¹ Tom Long, *Matthew* (1997), p. 211.

already given us more than we deserve, so, if God is merciful, is that enough to motivate mercy in us?

It wasn't for our forgiven slave. Even after experiencing life-changing mercy, he continues to live as if the world is a set of credits and debts to be settled. But the mercy of God is, for some, a north star from which they chart their own life of mercy.

Valerie Kaur is a brilliant forty-year-old woman, a graduate of Stanford, Harvard and Yale Law School. If there is anything more impressive than her big brain, it is her big heart. Her heart is shaped by her faith. She is not Presbyterian; she is not even Christian. She is a Sikh.

She remembers when her best friend in elementary and middle school told her how sad she was that Valerie wouldn't go to heaven. "Only Christians go to heaven," her friend told her. She had it all figured out. She knew what people deserved in the end, and told her so.

Valerie said, "She had no curiosity about me anymore."²² She had me all figured out. That lack of curiosity, that lack of wonder, stripped her friend of mercy.

Years later, Valerie became aware that many folks, most of whom I imagine thought of themselves as Christian, couldn't wait for Sikhs to know damnation. There was a rash of beatings, even murders, of Sikhs. She had an uncle who ran a gas station. While he was planting flowers to beautify his gas station, a man drove up behind him and shot him in the back.

It was a few weeks after 9/11. Men who are Sikhs wear turbans. Many Americans—knowing very little about other parts of the world, and other people from other parts—just knew they weren't like us and so they don't deserve what we deserve.

Like the rather astonishing increase of physical attacks on Asian Americans today, these attacks have to remind them of the treatment Japanese Americans experienced during World War II. Well after 9/11, many Sikhs were attacked.

Such acts of violence can make you bitter and it no doubt did for many. But Valerie Kaur chose

mercy. She labors for what she calls "revolutionary love." She says her grandfather, whom she calls Papa Ji, taught her this as a tenant of her faith. He taught her that she should endeavor to "see no stranger," as he says it. To see no one as a stranger, but rather as a part of your life story—a part of yourself that you don't know yet.

In her beautiful book, *See No Stranger*, she explains it this way: "Love is dangerous business, Papa Ji explained. If you choose to see no stranger, then you must love people even when they do not love you. You must wonder about them."²³

Wonder about them? Do you remember her school friend who had everything figured out? Ms. Kaur advocates that we set our certainty down and replace it with wonder.

I find the spiritual wisdom of this young Sikh woman an echo of this Beatitude of Jesus. I think mercy results from the spiritual practice of wonder. Wonder is the admission that you don't know everything about a person. You don't know the whole story and from our faith tradition, it means you may not know what it is that Jesus loves about that person. And until we do, we should wonder.

Wonder is where empathy is born. Wonder allows bridges of connection to flourish. Such wonder might allow us to see that life is not a scale on which all blessings are rewards for good behavior and all troubles are punishments for bad behavior, but rather a collection of moments and circumstances, a network of relationships and connections, an avenue to steward gifts which a merciful creator has bestowed upon you. If life is less a calculation of earned worth and more the first taste of salvation—in other words, if God is merciful—is that enough to motivate mercy in us?

If I understand the text, it suggests we have already been forgiven what we have messed up, and we have been blessed with

color
and music
and love

² Valerie Kaur, *See No Stranger* (2020), p. 19.

³ Valerie Kaur, *See No Stranger* (2020), p. 13.

and taste
and kindness
and care
and health
and friendship.

We have been forgiven a bazillion dollars. So, showing some wonder, showing some mercy to one another may cost us, but it's affordable.