

# SHOW MERCY

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LUKE 23:32-43

LOVE  
God  
Neighbor  
Enemy

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“Show Mercy” | Luke 23:32-43 | Pastor Jess Scholten

Throughout Lent, we are exploring the ways that we are called to Love God, Neighbor, and Enemy. We started the series out with exploring how to Love Extravagantly – loving God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength – and loving our neighbors as ourselves – fitting way to start out the series since love as the foundation of our very lives. As Dr. King writes, “the command to love one’s enemy is an absolute necessity” to our life in Christ.

Last week’s reminder for loving God, neighbor, and enemy was to Serve the Stranger, like Elijah and the Widow showed – valuing hospitality and care for others.

Today, we emphasize our call to **Show Mercy** – to embody for others what Jesus embodied, even on the cross: mercy.

Several years ago, a little gem of a book came out (hold up), *The Name of God is Mercy*. It’s an interview with then Pope Francis, who declared 2016 to be an extraordinary jubilee of mercy. The celebration centered around Luke 6:36 (slide) “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” Pope Francis, even in his second sermon ever as pope, emphasized mercy when he preached that “The message of Jesus is mercy.” He said, “For me, and I say this with humility, it is the Lord’s strongest message.”

The interviewer, veteran Vatican reporter, Andrea Tornielli, asked Francis: “Why, in your opinion, is humanity so in need of mercy?”

“Because humanity is wounded, deeply wounded,” reflected the Pope. “Either it does not know how to cure its wounds or it believes that it’s not possible to cure them.... The fragility of our era is this: we don’t believe that there is a chance for redemption; for a hand to raise you up, for an embrace to save you, forgive you, pick you up, flood you with infinite, patient, indulgent love; to put you back on your feet. We need mercy.”

We do indeed need mercy – to reflect upon it, to experience it through God’s grace, and to share it with others.

Our Scripture passage this morning is the embodiment of mercy – Jesus, literally hanging on the cross, asking forgiveness for humanity and extending mercy even to the criminal next to him. Hear the word of the Lord from Luke 23:32-43:

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. <sup>33</sup>When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[ <sup>34</sup>Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. <sup>35</sup>And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is

the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' <sup>36</sup>The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, <sup>37</sup>and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' <sup>38</sup>There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'

39 One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' <sup>40</sup>But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?' <sup>41</sup>And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' <sup>42</sup>Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' <sup>43</sup>He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'" Thanks be to God for this God's holy word for us today.

I like alignment – when things match up in various areas. Especially when the matchup happens between two long-planned unrelated things. For instance, over a year ago, several of us attended the Kingdom Justice Summit, an annual gathering here in Madison of ecumenically-minded folks seeking to learn about and participate in social justice activities. The key-note speaker was Dr. Christine Jeske, a Wheaton College professor with an upcoming book. That book was *Racial Justice for the Long Haul*, which finally arrived to us in January, in time for the February Racist Anonymous Fellowship book study. Our discussion on Wednesday rotated around part 5 – responding to grace.

Just in time for a long ago planned Lenten series with a sermon, an adult ed, and a Wednesday night fellowship dinner centered around mercy. The stars aligned.

Jeske's book on How White Christian Advocates Persevere in Racial Justice – not through one book study or a movie series or a speaker here and there, but for the Looooooong Haul of continued work – talks about how grace and forgiveness – mercy, if you will – is one of the ways we can be sustained in this life-long work.

Our discussion rotated around powerful stories of grace – times when White people made significant mistakes in their own racial bias and people of color extended significant mercy, listening and lovingly teaching. Or when two people simply endured painful aspects of conversation in order to stay in relationship.

Of racism, Jeske reflects: "Everyone involved [in seeking racial justice] knows that the account will never be zero." So how do we move forward? We can't wait until the accounts reach zero to begin a relationship across racial divides. Instead, we really on grace, mercy, forgiveness, patience. "Grace," writes Jeske, "doesn't bring the account to zero – it shatters the account to smithereens."

Grace – mercy – those ways that we receive God's unconditional positive regard and love – are what we offer to one another to live out our faith in like Jesus showed us.

In the same way that we love because God first loved us, we extend mercy because God extends mercy and grace to us.

We see that in the passage today. Even from the cross, Jesus prays for God to forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. There's a lot of speculation on who the "they" are Jesus is referencing. The empire that has God hanging on a cross? The religious authorities unable to share power with a rabble rouser? Are "they" the soldiers deriding Jesus or those casting lots

for his clothes?

Or is the “they” simply all of humanity? As if while Jesus’ arms are stretched wide, his imagination is stretched through all of history, seeing our sin and brokenness and praying for grace for each one of us. Here they are, Jesus prays, back to their same old violent ways from Cain and Abel to now – choosing violence over goodness. Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

Dr. Maria Mayo, in her book, *The Limits of Forgiveness*, ponders if part of the reason Jesus asks for God the Father to forgive is because he himself as both God and fully human, and the fully human aspects is having a hard time in the midst of that moment on the cross of finding forgiveness, but Jesus knows that God is merciful. Mayo reflects that, “The image of Jesus struggling with forgiveness in the face of violence can be an empowering one for victims who also struggle.” Our own human ability for forgiveness might wane, but God’s ability to forgive is always abundant.

We also see Jesus himself extending mercy. In Luke alone, we have so many examples of God’s abundant mercy. When Jesus is preaching on loving enemies, doing good, and lending without expecting anything in return, he calls us to mercy, just as our Creator is merciful (Luke 6).

The Good Samaritan where Jesus asks: who is the neighbor to the man? The Samaritan – in many ways the enemy in the culture – is the neighbor because he was the one who showed him mercy (Luke 10:37). The Great Banquet of chapter 14 where the guests are the outcasts, the poor, those with special needs – God compels us to invite all to experience God’s extravagant mercy. The Prodigal Son where the wasteful son is welcomed back by the father standing on the porch watching the horizon in hopes that he would make his way home: show mercy (Luke 15). The other Gospels tell other stories of Jesus’ abundant mercy – the woman at the well, healings, hospitality, forgiveness of sins – all facets of mercy.

Scripture itself tells the story again and again of the ways God has been at work in the world for mercy, grace, redemption, and renewal. The other Scripture passage listed for today is I Samuel 24, where David, anointed but not yet king of Israel, runs across Saul who was the king of Israel but has been hunting down David to do him harm. David sees Saul enter a cave where he and his men are resting, and it’s the moment David could take his revenge. His men even encourage him: “Here is the day which the Lord said to you, “I will give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it seems good to you.” But instead of harming Saul, David simply cuts off a small corner of his cloak. Later, David approaches Saul and shares how he spared Saul’s life.

King Saul says to David, “You are more righteous than I; for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil.”

Show mercy. We are called to be merciful because God is merciful.

It is perhaps more important now than in the recent past that we highlight mercy, because right now there are people who are claiming, in the name of Christ, that qualities of mercy such as compassion, empathy, and forgiveness are sin. It’s nuts, I know! Yesterday, a group of us were at the Kingdom Justice Summit, that day-long workshop featuring pastors, teachers, and community leaders sharing about justice. This year’s key-note speaker was activist and author Shane Claiborne, known for founding the Simple Way in Philadelphia to help their underserved neighborhood thrive, grow food, and create a neighborhood of mutual flourishing. Shane

reflected yesterday that right now we have a war on empathy, a war against compassion and virtues that we see in God, magnified in Jesus.

In any direction, we can make enemies of the other. Too much hate, too much compassion – toxic charity, toxic empathy. Over and over again, people seem to be accepting that anyone with whom we disagree is the enemy.

How can we work against this? Imago Dei – that all of humanity is made in the image of God. “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’ (Genesis 1:26) Even our very enemies are created as a reflection of God – maybe not their actions, maybe not their aspirations, but their very humanity and heart mirror our merciful Creator. Imago Dei – in the image of God.

I was reminded of this earlier this week when Shane posted the following reflection on social media: “People who claim to be Christians are promoting unimaginable violence right now. It is evil. It is wicked. It is an offense to God. Rebuke this violent perversion of our faith in the name of Jesus. And let’s do all we can to stop it. The world will know we are Christians “by our love.” The word Christian means “Christ-like.”

“Jesus is the Prince of Peace. He blessed the peacemakers and commanded us all to love our enemies. He rebuked his disciples when they resorted to violence. And he insisted that when we live by the sword we die by the sword. He carried a cross, not a sword. He died with mercy on his lips. That is our Savior. God is love. And every person in Iran is made in the image of God.” (From Shane Claiborne, 3/6/26)

Imago Dei – every person is made in the image of God. All behaviors might not belong, but every person belongs. Because we were first shown mercy by God – in every loving, gracious, and forgiving way that we are welcomed into God’s loving presence. Showing mercy is part of how we live out loving God, neighbors, and enemies as a reflection of God’s mercy.

One of my favorite contemporary songs of faith is “So Will I” by Hillsong Worship:

“And as You speak  
A hundred billion failures disappear  
Where You lost Your life so I could find it here  
If You left the grave behind You, so will I  
I can see Your heart in everything You've done  
Every part designed in a work of art called love  
If You gladly chose surrender, so will I

“I can see Your heart, eight billion different ways  
Every precious one, a child You died to save  
And if You gave Your life to love them, so will I  
Like You would again a hundred billion times  
But what measure could amount to Your desire?  
You're the One who never leaves the one behind”

Eight billion precious children of God on this planet. It’s not for us to decide who is our neighbor – it is for us to decide if we will reflect our Creator back to the world as we show mercy. May it be so. Amen.