

Sunday, October 25, 2015
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon

Mercy;

Have mercy on me!;

Lord have mercy;

O God we pray for your mercy;

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Mercy is one of those words present in our liturgies and prayers that we might not understand.

Mercy is referenced throughout scripture as an attribute of God and good human beings.

Sometimes it means an act of forgiveness, or a loving kindness.

Sometimes it refers to the emotion aroused by contact with undeserved suffering, a type of compassion—a deeply felt love for another human being.

In the Hebrew scriptures mercy is associated with the covenant obligation between God and humans.

Humans must be faithful to the covenant and God binds himself to fidelity to the covenant by mercy and by grace. (Grace is another word that we use a lot – another sermon perhaps).

Jesus is associated with mercy throughout the New Testament, demonstrating forgiveness, compassion and kindness to everyone he meets.

Mercy is when we act with kindness, even when it doesn't seem warranted.

God grants us mercy by forgiving our sins and continuing to sustain us even when we turn away from God's commands.

We extend mercy to others when we open our hearts to new ways of seeing people.

Mercy is accomplished when we suspend judgment and offer compassion, even when we don't feel like it!

Mercy is when we offer forgiveness to someone who doesn't seem to deserve it.

Mercy, often paired with forgiveness is the balm that restores relationships.

All of our readings this morning speak of God's power to restore and to rebuild.

Sometimes it is our outward circumstances, like Job's losses or Bartimaeus' sight, but on a deeper level, these activities restore one's relationship with God.

While it can be comforting to have our outward circumstances restored, it is when our hearts are restored that we are truly made new.

When we are delivered from the fear, self-protection, defensiveness, and isolation our brokenness or suffering has brought on, it is then that we are truly in right relationship with God.

The church, of course, is the perfect place to create and nurture such relationships.

But sometimes, we lose our way.

In 1517, Martin Luther became frustrated with the practice in the Catholic Church of selling indulgences – allowing people to pay to restore their relationship with God.

Luther, a Catholic monk started what has become known as the Protestant Reformation by nailing a document to the doors of the church in Wittenberg, Germany.

The document, called the *95 theses*, articulated his complaints.

Money was at the heart of Luther's protest.

At the time the church, under the leadership of the Pope, was promoting a practice of 'paying your way into heaven,' called indulgences.

You could pay to get your relatives out of purgatory;

You could pay to insure that you and your children would get into heaven.

You could pay a fee and have all your sins wiped clean.

If you had enough money, and you gave it to the church, you could be assured of a glorious eternity.

Luther rebelled against this practice.

A brief sampling of his theses to give you the flavor of his protest: #42-45:

42. Christians are to be taught that the pope does not intend that the buying of indulgences should in any way be compared with works of mercy.

43. Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences.

44. Because love grows by works of love, man thereby becomes better. Man does not, however, become better by means of indulgences but is merely freed from penalties.

45. Christians are to be taught that he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgences but God's wrath.

Luther's intent was not to start a new church, but to call his church back to a time and place where theology was more important than finances.

The principles of the reformation:

Only Scripture;

Only Faith;

Only Grace;

Only Christ;

would lay the foundation for the Protestant churches that we know today.

The Reformation continued for decades with Luther being excommunicated in 1521 after publishing several punishing manifestos and participating in public events designed to discredit the Catholic Church.

Throughout Europe wars between the Catholics and the Reformers would persist for another 150 years.

In 1620 a group of pilgrims seeking spiritual freedom, forebears of our United Church of Christ, left Europe for the New World.

Their pastor, John Robinson, urged them as they departed to keep their minds and hearts open to new ways.

“God,” he said, “has yet more light and truth to break forth out of his holy Word.”

Philip Melancthon, one of Luther’s closest associates said,

“Human life without knowledge of history is nothing other than a perpetual childhood, nay, a permanent obscurity and darkness.”

It is important that we know our history and are able to place ourselves in the evolving story of the church today.

Phyllis Tickle, a renowned religious writer of our time, championed the idea of a new reformation occurring every 500 years.

Noting all of the changes happening in the church she observed, “ The ensuing tumult leaves Christianity less ossified, more vital and open to growth, both geographically and demographically.”

There is no doubt that the church is changing as fast as the culture is changing.

Priorities and values that once went unquestioned get discarded like yesterday’s trash.

We are in a time where traditions and rituals are routinely examined for their relevance.

Some are maintained, and some are left behind.

Just like Martin Luther, we are called to examine our church and our practices and to ensure that they are both firmly rooted in our belief in a triune God: creator, sustainer and redeemer.

No wonder we cry out *Jesus, Son of David have mercy on us!*

While our world is subject to much tumult we are reminded of Jesus’ response to the one who cries out.

“What do you want me to do for you?”

We cannot just lament, we must be able to articulate what it is that we want.

I have a familiar response to people who tell me all of the things they are against.

I ask them to tell me what they are for.

Tell me who you are and what you want Jesus to do for you, rather than showering me with a litany of all the things that are wrong.

Martin Luther was a powerful reformer because he not only had the ability to point out what was wrong with the religious world at the time, he was able to see a future where things could be different.

He was able to imagine God’s church in the world.

This is our calling as well.

Today we will hold the 271st annual meeting of this congregation.

We will examine, via our financial documents, what we stand for and where we are going.

As one commentator said, “we aren't just reformed. We are reforming. The Church must continually re-evaluate itself and explore ways to stay relevant... for the next 500 years.”

I hope that you will take the time to participate in the annual meeting, to take responsibility for the future of your church.

We might not all agree on strategies, but we can be thankful that we don’t have to go to war to settle our disputes.

We can be grateful to our ancestors for bequeathing us a strong, well-resourced church rich in tradition and compassion.

We will come together to determine how to ensure that this church will be here for our descendants 500 years from now.

Take heart, get up, he is calling you!