

"Mercy in the Wilderness"

Psalm 25:1-10; Luke 10:25-37

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York Center Church of the Brethren

Jonathan Shively, preacher

Thanks to Dave for his words and leadership this morning. Again, I welcome Pastor Christy back to worship. I know the congregation is eager for you to return to your ministry among them, especially the preaching. One of the responsibilities that I have taken on, while not stated explicitly in the guest pastor agreement, is to make absolutely sure that they will appreciate your preaching like they never have before!

Someone once told me that it doesn't matter what you preach as long as you sing, because people remember the song. I will try to balance out my preaching with a few songs during my weeks here; I don't think they will add to your job description. This morning's tune by Steve Camp came readily to mind when this morning's theme of mercy began to take shape. Steve Camp was one of the early pioneers of the contemporary Christian music movement back in the late 1970s. Camp was actually born in Wheaton, and studied music and composition at Roosevelt University. He has at least ten albums to his credit.

I saw Camp in person at a Christian musician's conference back in 1995 or so. A college friend and I had just recorded an album of original music, and Barry thought that we should attend the conference to market and promote our endeavor. I went because it was in Estes Park, CO at the YMCA Camp of the Rockies, where I had attended the last National Youth Conference to be held there, and where my wife Kim and I began a new chapter in our friendship which eventually led to dating and marriage. Barry's motivation was fame; mine was nostalgia

The conference overall was a mixed bag. The primary learning I took from it was that, much like a lot of Brethren congregations and even Annual Conference, the whole "industry" at the time was a bit of a closed circle, even a little incestuous.

A highlight of the week for me, however, was a concert featuring many of the then-famous musicians like Amy Grant, Steven Curtis Chapman, and Michael W. Smith. When Steve Camp took the stage I wasn't sure even who he was, but he sang a song directed squarely at much of the industrialization of contemporary Christian music with the tag line "and

they call it the ministry." It seemed courageous, taking the commercialization of the faith to task, although perhaps it was not so full of mercy. I did later purchase the music to his 1995 album *Mercy in the Wilderness*.

Camp followed his music career with one as a speaker and pastor. Sometimes our momentary heroes don't live up to the billing. Apparently he is now serving as pastor of a small SBC church in Florida. I don't think I would sit up in admiration of his theology today. But given the chance, perhaps I would be challenged to show him a bit of the very mercy that he brought to life for me in song.

Mercy is a bit like this at times. It is required for those who have fallen on difficult times, or perhaps have become difficult themselves. And it is required of us, even when, or perhaps especially because, we see ourselves as important or chosen in some way.

Today's scripture is one of the more readily known encounters from Jesus' ministry. The story within the story, commonly referred to as the story of the Good Samaritan, has a life of its own. But it is, of course, wrapped up in the test by a smart alec lawyer who wants to know what is required to inherit eternal life. Jesus, perhaps the greatest debater of all time, "points" the lawyer to the great commandment.

Like an argumentative nine-year-old, not to be outdueled, the lawyer then seeks "clarification" on the great commandment. Who is my neighbor, the lawyer asks. Then follows the story of the Good Samaritan.

We know this story by heart. All the important religious people (Priest, Levite) approach the person beaten by robbers, but make excuses and move on around, leaving the fella in the road. It is the unlikely Samaritan who is moved with pity and takes mercy on the man.

Pity and mercy are linked etymologically. They are part of the same word. *Misericordia* is latin for "mercy," from *misericors*, "merciful," which is in turn derived from *misereri*, "to pity," and *cor*, "heart."

It is easy to focus on what the Samaritan DID. The Samaritan responded to the needs of the beaten Jew. Wounds were bandaged, transportation was provided, a safe place to rest and recover was secured, bills were paid. It is a great example of service, service that crosses social boundaries and breaks stereotypes. It sounds a lot like Brethren service.

In her fabulous little book *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy*, Anne Lamott points out that mercy is more than action, however. "Mercy means compassion, empathy, a heart for someone's troubles. It's not something you do - it is something in you, accessed, revealed, or cultivated through use, like a muscle. We find it in the most unlikely places, never where we first look."

Our son Ben, who is with us here today, experienced this type of mercy a few years ago at an intergenerational workcamp held at Camp Mandela on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Ben and I attended with my dad, a truly intergenerational Shively family activity. There was a youth group from the other end of Maryland and a few other individuals in attendance. Dan McFadden was one of the leaders.

Ben had looked forward to this workcamp for a year. When I say "looked forward," I mean he talked about it daily for over 300 consecutive days. To say he was eager to attend would be an understatement.

About mid week or a little after, Ben was tired (we all were) and beginning to act out about a number of things. Ben is a great guy, but sometimes he also has a temper. After a number of different episodes of increasing intensity were witnessed by the other campers, Ben had a really major explosion, breakdown, outburst. He was at his wits ends; unfortunately I was, too. Ben stomped out of the dining hall.

A few minutes later, I looked across the clearing and there was Ben at a picnic table surrounded by the kids from this youth group. I know I have a picture somewhere. Those compassionate, empathetic teens connected with Ben's struggle through their hearts and reached out to him. They didn't just take pity on him, they showed him mercy. Literally "mercy in the wilderness."

This is how most mercy pours out. Through simple, thoughtful, humane, compassionate actions. We extend mercy when our hearts connect with the plight of others and we are compelled to act.

Sometimes mercy is more spectacular. I grew up in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Our family's back yard bordered Amish farmland. The seasons of the year were marked by the sights and sounds of mule teams, manure, and freshly cut crops moving through the fields.

Our daily commutes were slowed by the prospect of horse and buggies over the next hill. Our Brethren piety was often compared (generally unfavorably) to the religious sectarianism of our Anabaptist cousins.

In 2006 this community of peaceful, industrious, neighborly Amish was rocked when a local man entered the West Nickel Mines one room schoolhouse only miles from my childhood home and shot ten Amish schoolgirls, killing five before killing himself.

The violence and losses were heartbreaking. There were few answers for this invasion into the peaceful community of our neighbors. But the response of the Amish community left many observers incredulous. Recognizing that the widow and family of the murderer were also victims of this event, the Amish surrounded them with empathy, compassion, kindness, and love, including them in the process of grieving and taking steps to share in healing. They extended mercy to her and her family.

In response to their actions, the widow Marie Roberts wrote an open letter to her Amish neighbors thanking them for their forgiveness, grace, and mercy. She wrote, "Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you."

To love our neighbor is to not only show mercy, but also to feel empathy and cultivate compassion. Mercy always has two sides, the giver and the recipient.

We often dissect the story of the Good Samaritan from the perspective of the helpers. But what is the view like from the middle of the road, beaten, abandoned, and passed by?

Lamott decided to write about mercy because she sees it as the heart of all great faith traditions. And she writes about it because in her own spiritual journey she has relied on mercy, from those around her and from God, to build her faith and help her overcome her own demons.

"But love and mercy are sovereign, if often in disguise as ordinary people, and as inescapable as sturdy pediatric nurses. Over and over, in spite of our awfulness and having squandered our funds, the ticket-taker at the venue waves us on through. Forgiven and

included, when we experience this, that we are in this with one another, flailing and starting over in the awful beauty of being humans together, we are saved."

Mercy saves.

When in your life has mercy saved you?

I never thought of it until this reading of today's text, but perhaps in addition to the beaten traveler, another recipient of mercy in this encounter with Jesus is the lawyer. While it seems at first blush to be a pretty contentious argument with Jesus, perhaps you too will see signs in the way that Jesus graciously, rhetorically, in a manner understood by the lawyer, brought him to task, yes, but more than that brought him to a fuller understanding of God's mercy, of Jesus' own purpose.

It could be that's reading too much into the story. But it gives me some hope. Hope that in spite of my bull-headedness Jesus might break through. Hope that in spite of my stubbornness mercy might supplant my self-sufficiency. Hope that in my brokenness my spirit might be renewed and guided into new paths. Hope that being alone in my resentment will be overcome by an embrace of God's forgiveness.

One last thought from Anne Lamott: "Forgiveness and mercy mean that, bit by bit, you begin to outshine the resentment. You open the drawer that was shut and you take out the precious treasures that you hid there so long ago and, with them, the person who marvels at tadpoles, who pulls for people to come clean and then have a second chance, who aches and intervenes for those being bullied, forgives the evil brothers and unforgivable you."

Whether it's in your own wilderness or in someone else's that you find yourself, may compassion, empathy, kindness, and love be uncovered there. Whether you see yourself as the Jew, the Samaritan, the Lawyer, or even the Priest or Levite, may mercy define your heart and infuse your action.

Who is my neighbor? Let me tell you a story of Jesus, a story of mercy.