

Falling in Love with Mercy

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On the first day of our second attempt at an Iraq war, evangelical activist Tony Campolo preached a sermon in which he recommended that the United States dump shiploads of free food and medicine on Iraq and then see if Sadaam was still in power a month later. He was serious. When asked for his justification for such unorthodox diplomacy, Campolo replied, “Mercy. Read Micah 6:8.”

In Micah 6:1-8, the first lesson for Epiphany 4a, after taking up a “controversy” with Israel because of the nation’s infidelities, Yahweh straightforwardly tells Israel what is expected of a liberated people. Surprisingly, Yahweh, unlike many other gods, is not into “burnt offerings,” even “thousands of rams,” or the sacrifice of children. Yahweh’s liturgical requirements are few (6:8): doing justice (*mishpat*), loving mercy (*hesed*), and a humble walk with God.

Do you find it interesting that whereas we are to “do” justice and to “walk” humbly, we are to “love” mercy? How can God “require” us to “love mercy”? At first glance, my colleagues and I seem to have an easy task in this homiletical exchange on Micah 6. Justice and humility are popular just now. Everybody, even someone like Richard Dawkins who doesn’t love Yahweh, loves justice, peace with justice, and a just resolution of all conflicts. And when it comes to us pastors, humble “servant leadership” is all the rage.¹ Have I been given the tougher task of defending Yahweh’s requirement to “love mercy”?

Biblical *hesed* is often rendered “mercy,” but sometimes “lovingkindness” and “goodness.” I count in the NRSV about one hundred fifty occurrences of “mercy” and fifty for “compassion.” *Hesed* is defined basically as aid rendered to the miserable, particularly a miserable person in debt. And yet here is the thing I find remarkable: *in scripture, mercy is almost totally a divine, rather than a human, attribute.* Of course, there are notable examples of mercy as a human endeavor. Joseph showed mercy to his brothers who turned up in Egypt looking for food (Gen. 43:14). Jesus makes mercy a characteristic of life in the kingdom; those who show mercy will be rewarded by God’s mercy (Mt. 5:7). Luke commends mercy specifically as a way to imitate God: “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Lk. 6:36). Jesus tells the story of the unmerciful servant, commending us to be merciful to the miserable even as God is merciful to us (Mt. 18:38). I find it significant that these references to humans doing mercy are numerically few when compared to the multiple passages that marvel at the mercy of God.

In scripture human mercy is derivative of the sort of God that we’ve got. The God who created Israel is providentially merciful to all creatures, but toward humans God is particularly merciful in forgiving sins. God is universally acclaimed as “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6; Ps. 86:15; 103:8 RSV). The New Testament continues this very Jewish assertion of a merciful God who is “rich in mercy” (Eph. 2:4-5), the “father of mercies” (1 Cor. 1:3). God’s mercy is principally experienced as God’s gracious forgiveness of humanity’s sin, Christ himself being the culmination, the embodiment not so much of

God's righteousness, but of God's mercy.

Christ is the "merciful and faithful high priest" (Heb 2:17). As for us Gentiles, once we "had not received mercy," but now we "have received mercy" (1 Peter 2:10; cf. Hosea 1:6, 9; 2:1, 23). Mercy in Christ has a shocking, counterintuitive quality. Jesus is mercy in motion. Faced with demanding, hurting crowds, Jesus is said to have "had compassion (*splagchmizomai*) for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Mt. 9:36). People often came up to Jesus begging him for mercy before they asked to be forgiven or to be healed (Mt. 15:22; 17:15; 20:30-31; Mk. 10:47; Lk. 17:13; 18:38-39), though a primary sign of a merciful God is forgiveness of sin. In one sense, every story of exorcism, feeding, healing, and forgiveness is a mercy story. Mercy is close cousin of compassion in scripture. Mercy is compassion in motion. It's one thing to feel compassion (literally to think "from the bowels"), but it's another thing to show compassion, to act mercifully.

We preachers note that some of the most outrageous depictions of a merciful God are Jesus' parables (the parables being the perfect idiom for the depiction of outrageous mercy) like the Laborers in the Vineyard (Mt. 20), the Dishonest Servant (Lk. 16:1-8), the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:30-35), and the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-32). All of these parables depict how offensive divine mercy can be, particularly to those within synagogue and church, communities of mercy. Our best gospel figure of mercy is the Good Samaritan, a despised outsider who not only "had compassion," but also "showed mercy to the wounded man (Luke 10:33, 37). Note that all these parables are renditions of how God is merciful before they are admonitions about what we are to be or to do.

John Wesley disputed Luther's put down of the Letter of James wondering why on earth Luther, who so stressed a merciful God, would despise James' insistence on our being merciful people (Jas. 1:27) by helping the widow (Jas 1:27) and respecting the poor (Jas 2:1-16). Against Luther, Wesley stressed how sharply James shows that, when it comes to the Trinity, "mercy triumphs over judgment" (Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament*, on Jas. 2:13). Our relationship to God, as Romans 9:16 says, "depends not on human will or exercise, but upon God's mercy.... He has mercy upon whomever he wills." This was a major reason why Wesley argued with Calvinists against their stress upon the sovereignty of God – God could be sovereign and all-controlling if God wanted, but instead God chose to be merciful.

I note the theological grounding of mercy in scripture because most of the sermons that I hear, and many that I preach, trade especially on the preacher's enumeration of what is required of us. My image of Methodists on Sunday morning is our sitting in worship with a hymnal in one hand and a notepad in the other. The purpose of the sermon is to give us our assignment for the week. Most of us are conditioned to be more interested in what we are required to do than in what God has done or is doing, a byproduct of a people more concerned with ourselves than God. But I'm saying that Micah 6:8, when it requires us to love mercy, is making a most interesting assertion about God, and only secondarily, and then derivatively, does it say anything about us. In requiring us to "love mercy," God is demanding something odd and unnatural of us. I think Nietzsche was among the first, at least in modern times, to see this clearly and to focus upon mercy as one of the most despised of the many Jewish and Christian mistakes. Nietzsche hated Christianity principally for its ethic of mercy, its enfeebling solicitude for the weak and outcast, the diseased and crippled. Yet those of us in liberal

mainline Protestantism ought especially to note that though Nietzsche thought it essential for a humanity come of age to overcome traditional Christian piety's "slave morality," Nietzsche had equal contempt for any modern liberal attempt to resuscitate Christian mercy in a diluted, atheistic form — such as social conscience or sympathy for the marginalized, suspecting that any effort at an ethic of compassion based upon something other than Christ (such as soft hearted sentimentality) would be an even greater delusion. An ethic of compassion without a prior assertion of a God of compassion is the ultimate delusion. People just aren't built that way. It's unnatural. Since the Christian God of mercy is dead, Nietzsche figured that there was absolutely no rationale for an ethic of mercy other than resentment by the weak of the strong. He was wrong in this, but right in his assertion that the only commendation of mercy that makes sense is theological.² Resentment is crude, destructive, vindictive; mercy is counterintuitive, unnatural, countercultural, and courageously creative. In short, there is no motive for mercy other than *this is the way God really is and therefore God's world is created to be*.

While the Christian faith has been used, however bizarrely, as a motive for killing, the one who died showing mercy on those who tortured him to death, the one who commanded us to love our enemies, provides the sole compelling reason for being merciful.

I stress this because we preachers think about mercy in the context of the most violent and unmerciful of centuries in which the secular order succeeded in freeing itself from religious authority, thereby enabling the secular state to kill on a previously unimaginable scale. The death camps and purges of the modern state, left and right, democratic and fascist, suggest that when Christianity departs, what is left is not reason and enlightenment, but mass murder, eugenics, and abortion. There is a fearful cost to the modern world's loss of a merciful God.

Mercy is that peculiar quality which has never been produced by the various religions of the empire.³ Nothing any of the pagan gods preached ever motivated anyone to visit the prisoner, to feed the hungry, to care for the suffering and dying, or to receive the unwanted child. No pagan cult, classical or modern, ever built a hospital or orphanage. The Christian embrace of mercy therefore always involves a rejection of the gods who have previously held the empire together and provided a rationale for its existence.

Mercy was the revolutionary, defiant act that Jesus hurled in the face of the Empire.⁴ Mercy was a main attraction (as well as chief repulsion) in the evangelism of the Roman Empire.⁵ It was Christian mercy that made the Christian minority a real threat. Mercy was the one Christian practice that baffled most imperial observers of the faith who knew that there was no classical intellectual means of explanation for such curious behavior (see Celsus', *The True Word*). Fitful pagan provision for the sick and the infirm is insignificant when compared with the veritable explosion of unprecedented Christian charity. Even the Emperor Julian, for all his animosity toward the faith, acknowledged, "It is [the Christians'] philanthropy toward strangers, the care they take of the graves of the dead, and the affected sanctity with which they conduct the sanctity of their lives that have done the most to spread their atheism." In short, mercy was, for imperial Romans, the strangest, most countercultural of Christian practices, a virtue for which the entire Classical philosophical tradition provided them no help in comprehending.⁶

Mercy was built into the core of ecclesiastical life from the first. The third century *Didascalia* entrusts the bishop with oversight of food distribution to the poor, the care of widows and orphans, and watching over the finances of the church to be sure that no money is taken from those who abuse slaves or wasted on those who are not in real need. It was only after Constantine's conversion that the West suddenly created for the first time in history, an extensive welfare system, overseen by the church. During the great plague of 251-266, a number of pagan commentators noted that Christians refused to flee the cities and cared for those who were not even in their own families. Rodney Stark thinks that this behavior during the plague may have been the single most important eye-catching impetus for evangelism.

Nietzsche noted that this move toward mercy, in the Christianization of the Empire, this "transvaluation of values," was a complete revision and reversal of time-honored, classically upheld values, a tragic dismantling of the grandest culture humanity had produced. Why did this dismantling occur? In just a few hundred years, the world's definition of God had changed on the basis of the world's reception of the one who had exchanged the form of God to the form of a slave (Phil 2:1-11). Nietzsche scorned Christianity as a sort of slave revolt against classical values, a sickly version of morality that judged human action not against the standard of the brave, the heroic, the beautiful, and the noble (universally held classical virtues), but against the baffling standard of mercy.

To believe that the glory of God is revealed in the raising of a humiliated, crucified, suffering slave who proclaimed the Kingdom of God for the enslaved and forsaken of the earth is thus to turn the world upside down. This slave was in the world as an otherworldly tenderness. As he said, "My kingdom is not from the world" (Jn. 18:36). His was a mercy beyond mercy, seeing the marginalized not only as those to be pitied, but also as those to be cherished, served, and adored. I'm arguing here that the sheer impracticality of Christianity, its strange mercy ethic, is an argument for its theological origin. No utilitarianism, no pragmatic rationalism, could have resulted in this sort of ethic. It is truly "not from here."

In pointing to the theological rationale for mercy, I am attempting to challenge the liberal, mainline, Protestant attempt to commend mercy on grounds other than God. For us mainline protestants, Reinhold Niebuhr is a tough habit to break. Niebuhr taught us that in order to be politically responsible and socially significant, that when it comes to ethics, particularly social ethics, Jesus needs to be left behind. A major impulse for jettisoning Jesus is his propensity toward mercy which Niebuhr thought had no other rationale than rank sentimentalism. Niebuhr made justice more important than love or mercy, ideals that must be left behind because everybody knows that justice requires coercion and even violence. For Niebuhr "justice" is the relatively equitable arrangement that we construct because we obviously cannot show mercy to all of our neighbors. Justice names the arrangements necessary to secure more equitable forms of life when we cannot love all neighbors equally. Niebuhr didn't talk about mercy because he assumed that the purpose of the church and its ministry was to help the modern democratic nation work, and, as anyone knows, mercy is too much to ask of a government, any government. One of the most radical, politically defiant acts Christians undertake is to show mercy across national borders and to be merciful to those whom the modern state, in order to insure its survival, puts outside the bounds of mercy.

I didn't have to be a Christian theologian to figure out that the Bush Administration's wars without end were counter to our Christian convictions. But I do find that knowing who God really is and what God really requires is helpful in exposing the dangers of the apparently well-intentioned Obama administration and its good hearted war to force Afghanistan to be a modern nation.

If you would like to see an attempt to construct an ethic of compassion without reference to a compassionate God, check out Karen Armstrong's "Charter for Compassion" (charterforcompassion.org). Armstrong claims that compassion is "at the heart of all religions, ethical and spiritual traditions." I don't know as much as Armstrong about all religions, but I do think she demonstrates that if you empty "compassion" of any offensive content, making it as vague as possible, there is a good chance that all religions can affirm it. This is something quite different from Christian mercy.

For Christians, Jesus is God's definition of the word "mercy." But when it comes to what we are to do, ethics, we are able to say more than simply, "Jesus showed mercy and so should we." This relegates Jesus to a motivator for us to show mercy. Jesus becomes a symbol, an example, and makes the Jewish people, who are themselves a surprising creation of a merciful God, irrelevant. Mercy is not an external value to which Christians ought to aspire. Mercy can't be understood or enacted apart from this Jew from Nazareth who is the full revelation of God. Our mercy must be Christocentric. It must be ecclesial, not only because there is no way to practice mercy solo in an unmerciful world, but also because the church itself is God's outrageous, defiant definition of mercy. If God isn't merciful toward the ungrateful and the selfish, then how do you explain the churches of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church? Mercy isn't just something nice that we do for the less fortunate; mercy is the way the world is structured, a revelation of God's pentecostal redemptive activity. When we say "Exodus" or "Calvary," we are naming God's merciful nature. Jesus is notable not only because he was merciful, but Jesus *is* the mercy of God.

Thus mercy is the way we worship, the way we keep exploring the odd sort of God we've got. The Sunday liturgy thus helps us locate ourselves as disciples in the world. We relearn, in word and table, that we are those "who once had not received mercy but now receive mercy" (1 Peter 2:10). We are given the grace to repent of our failures to be merciful and given the eschatological vision whereby we see the new heaven and new earth, namely the earth filled with love of mercy when God finally gets what God wants. Sunday worship is when God draws us, not usually through careful argument and deliberation in a sermon, but through love, through a merciful meal at a table prepared and presided over by the one who, even as a tortured to death slave, prayed, "Father, forgive..." Mercy is the byproduct of a community that is shaped by love of Christ. Which is a long way around to say that I think that's the reason why the prophet connects "love" with "mercy."

God's command for us to fall in love with mercy is an aspect of God's redemptive work among us, God's desire to liberate us from our sin. The call to love mercy is a call to be engrafted into the Body of Christ, to allow Christ to reorder our loves, to be drawn, Sunday-by-Sunday into the love of the right things rightly through our love of Christ.

Israel kept being forced to remember that it was an alien in the land of Egypt (Leviticus 19:33) as well as a slave (Deuteronomy 24:21) and indeed would still be

were it not for a merciful God. Israel was enjoined to be merciful as a memorial of Yahweh's deliverance from the Empire.

Matthew 25: 31-45 suggests to me that works of mercy are not general principles or worthy values that Christians must translate into a more universal or secular vision that is applicable to the "wider world." Rather mercy is God's invitation to participate in God's redemption by feeding the hungry, offering drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, and visiting the sick and imprisoned. In doing works of mercy, Matthew 25:31-45 implies that we come face-to-face with the true character of God.⁷ Merciful work is also a primary gift that God gives us to overcome our sinful accommodation (Christian "realism"!) to the ways of the world. Thus one of God's most merciful acts in Jesus Christ is through word and sacrament, to enable us, even us, to be merciful and thus to discover who and where God really is.

Notes

1 William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 68-69.

2 David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 238.

3 Ibid., 121.

4 To my mind, this is one of the things that John Dominic Crossan gets right and makes so vivid in his *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

5 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996.

6 Julian, Epistle 22, written to a pagan priest, quoted by Hart, 154.

7 Dan Bell, "Jesus, the Jews, and the Politics of God's Justice," *Ex Auditer*, 22 (2006), 106.