

UNDESERVED MERCY AND AMAZING GRACE

There's a murky line between mercy and injustice. Would you agree? I thought about that as I reflected on this morning's parable from Luke's Gospel. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." That's such a direct, heart-felt prayer. Jesus certainly liked it. Indeed, he said the tax collector who prayed it received a favorable response from God; he hit the divine forgiveness jackpot with it. Jesus said that because of his contrite petition, the tax collector went home "justified."

Now, if I was God—and I'll pause a moment here so all of you can heave a big sigh of relief that I'm not—but if I was God, and I heard such a prayer from a self-confessed "sinner," I'd need to think on it a while. "Not so fast there, my tax collector friend. You say you want me to have mercy on you? Okay, I'll take it under consideration. Let me get back to you on that."

You see, if I was God and someone asked me to be merciful to them, I would need to keep in mind who exactly was praying that prayer. Is it Harry or Harriet again? Have I heard this prayer request from them before? How many times did they pray it? A few times? Dozens of times? Did they ask for mercy for the same thing just a few days ago? Did they learn anything from their previous screw up? And what wrong did they do? What specific sin or sins did they commit, that brought them to my throne of grace? Was it a biggy? A capital crime? Or did their wrongdoing fall under the category of a minor stumble that could easily be forgiven because it's a harmless offense that really didn't hurt anybody?

Then, as God, I would also have to consider the whole question of mercy versus justice. You see, if I dole out mercy in an abundant and reckless manner, it waters down and weakens the concept of justice. Do the crime, pay the time. If I forgive you for your sin, especially if it's a whopper of a transgression, then I've basically let you get away with it. I've just given you a *Get out of Jail Free* card. Why should I do that? Won't that just encourage you to go forth and sin again, then return to ask me for yet another complimentary pass? When will it end? I can't just keep on being merciful forever. That wouldn't be fair to the people who are successfully towing the line and living good Christian lives.

That's what I'd think, if I were God. But that would make God pretty human. Or I guess it would make me a pretty poor God.

There is a murky line between mercy and injustice. Which is why I'd never want God's job. There are too many difficult decisions to make; too many people whose eternal destiny would be in my hands, and I don't want that responsibility. Compassion or harshness? Mercy or injustice? There are no clear-cut ways to decipher which is which. One person's mercy is another person's injustice. I don't want to have to make such hard choices, so I'll let the Creator of the universe do that, thank you very much.

"God, be merciful to me, a sinner." In my almost thirty two years of parish ministry, I've had a number of people come to my office or corner me privately at Neighboring after worship, and share with me their deep yearning to be forgiven for something they did that they're truly sorry for. Often it was a deed they had committed many years ago—sometimes it was even a childhood indiscretion. And oftentimes, mingled with their heartfelt desire for forgiveness was the fear and dread that God would never forgive them. Never, never, not ever. They believe that God will reject their pleas for mercy because God must be very angry with them; and maybe God is even looking forward with glee to doling out the proper, well-deserved punishment at some point in their lives—or after their deaths.

The pain, anxiety and sorrow I've seen in the faces or heard in the voices of some of the people I've counseled because of their doubts about God's willingness to forgive them is almost impossible for me to forget. And I've wondered, on more than one occasion, how can I possibly reassure them?

How can I speak for God and tell them with confidence, "You have been forgiven"? How can I effectively communicate the good news to them that there is no sin so great, no wrongdoing so terrible, that it's beyond God's ability to forgive you"? That's what I truly believe. And yet, I'm not the one who has the final say regarding the forgiveness they yearn for.

The only thing I can really do as a pastor is to direct them to God's Word, and to the life of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels, and remind them that God loved the world so much—the world they are part of--that God sent His only Son, so everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have Eternal Life."

The astounding thing about God's mercy and grace; the reason we call God's grace "amazing," is because it goes so far beyond human mercy. Compared to a normal human being's capacity and willingness to forgive and be merciful, God's capacity and willingness is so great, so immeasurable, it's almost scandalous. God's grace isn't just "amazing," it's startling. It's not only startling, it's outrageous. And it's not only outrageous, it's infuriating—when it's offered to someone else we don't think deserves it, that is.

The simple fact is, God's undeserved mercy, God's amazing grace, is startling,

outrageous and infuriating because God offers it to people we wouldn't offer it to. People like, say, the tax collector in Jesus' parable.

Now there was one disreputable scoundrel. Working for the hated Roman occupiers. Making a living, literally, by cheating others, collecting more taxes than were owed to the Empire and keeping the difference for himself. A lot of tax collectors back then grew quite wealthy doing that. And such a villainous rat wants mercy? Hah. That'll be the day.

Well, maybe for us that'll be the day, but not for God. As Jesus himself said when this disgraceful, reprehensible man prayed, "God be merciful to me, a sinner": "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified. . . . Because all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Yes, there sure is a murky line between mercy and injustice. And it seems that's the way God wants it to be. But maybe God wants that line to be murky so it will keep us humble, and (hopefully) stop us from making black and white judgments against other people—judgments that we have neither the wisdom nor the right to make.

The distinguished biblical scholar Martin Hengel once noted that Jesus had a way of including in the Gospel story people whom we would exclude from the story. I think that's what is happening here in the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The tax collector is being included in the story of the Good News of salvation. This parable tells us something fascinating and incredible about God. Because, for me, the most interesting character in this parable of Jesus is God. Or I should say, the image or understanding of God that the Pharisee and the tax collector have. Both of those men, when they prayed, revealed through their prayer a very different belief about God.

For the Pharisee, God was the One who set down certain hard and fast rules that God's people were supposed to follow; and the Pharisee, at least in his own mind, believed that he had been phenomenally successful in following those rules. And for the tax collector, God was the one who set down certain rules that God's people are supposed to follow, but he believed that he had been a disastrous failure at following those rules.

The God of the Pharisee was content and pleased with the Pharisee's efforts to be righteous, while the God of the tax collector was displeased and angry with the tax collector's unsuccessful attempts to be righteous. It's likely that almost everyone listening to Jesus tell this parable understood God one of those two ways. But Jesus, in this parable, seemed to be asking the question, "What if God isn't like either of those?"

What if God isn't the giver of hard and fast rules, or the setter of standards we must meet in order to be forgiven, but rather is simply the One who loves us; the One who seeks out the lost and weary and yearns to bring them back to God's self—not because of their numerous attempts, good or bad, failed or successful, to live a righteous and holy life and earn their way into heaven, but in spite of them?

What if God isn't all that impressed with our self-described piety and good works, but isn't deterred from caring about us because of our constant mess ups?

What if God's truest and deepest nature and most heartfelt desire is to show us steadfast love, forgiveness, and mercy, no matter what?

In short, what if God is like the God who was actually revealed to us in Jesus' parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee?

The tax collector prayed, "God be merciful to me, a sinner. And what was the result of his prayer? Jesus said, "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified." That's quite a God, wouldn't you say? A God who justifies and is merciful and forgiving toward those who, in the world's eyes, are unjustifiable and don't deserve mercy or forgiveness, because those individuals are humble enough to know that they can't justify themselves or earn their own mercy and forgiveness. They need God to do that. And, by the way, so do we.

I want to read you something I read about God's mercy and forgiveness. It comes from an article called *Seven Wonders of the Spiritual World*, published by Bill Hybels in *Word* magazine. In it Hybels wrote: "Once you ask God to forgive you, you need to get up and proceed with your life as though God has forgiven you. "We're tempted to say, 'I don't feel forgiven; which is why God put in His Word some classic forgiveness promises that you can memorize.

Such as the *amnesia* promise from the prophet Jeremiah: ' . . . I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.' In other words, God is saying, "What was that sin you think I didn't forgive? I don't even remember it. It's done. It's gone.'

"Then there's the *stain removal* promise from Isaiah: 'Though your sins are scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool.'

"The *East-West* promise in the 103rd Psalm is a powerful one: 'As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our transgressions from us.'

"And finally we have the *deep sea* promise from the prophet Micah: 'God will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.'"

Hybels ended his article by encouraging his readers, "When a voice whispers in your ear, 'God didn't fully forgive you. You still have some wrongdoings on your slate,' just use one of the forgiveness promise verses as a reminder of God's great

mercy and amazing grace.”

I hope somebody reminded that poor tax collector, and somebody will remind us from time to time, about God’s promises of divine mercy and grace. Because that’s how, in God’s eyes, and by God’s grace, we get to go home justified. How we go home forgiven. How we go home loved.

Not because of who we are, but because of who God is.

Not because of what we have done, but because of what God has done for us in Jesus.

And not because we don’t deserve God’s judgment or God’s justice, but because God chooses to deal with us in a different way than we human beings often deal with others and with ourselves. With undeserved mercy and amazing grace.

Thanks be to God. Amen.