

La Sierra University Church
8:30 a. m.
August 16, 2008

Genesis 45:1-15

45:1 Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers.

45:2 And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it.

45:3 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

45:4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.

45:5 And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.

45:6 For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest.

45:7 God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.

45:8 So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

45:9 Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, "Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay.

45:10 You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have.

45:11 I will provide for you there--since there are five more years of famine to come--so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.

45:12 And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you.

45:13 You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here."

45:14 Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck.

45:15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Psalm 133

133:1 How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

133:2 It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.

133:3 It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

11:1 I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.

11:2a God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel?

11:29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

11:30 Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience,

11:31 so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy.

11:32 For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28

15:10 Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand:

15:11 it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."

15:12 Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?"

15:13 He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.

15:14 Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit."

15:15 But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us."

15:16 Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding?"

15:17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?

15:18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.

15:19 For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.

15:20 These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

15:21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

15:22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."

15:23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."

15:24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

15:25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."

15:26 He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

15:27 She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

15:28 Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

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What does Mercy look like, and how is she revealed? Only our New Testament readings employ the word mercy but, in fact, she appears in all our texts this morning. The Old Testament lessons show Mercy at work in the context of family, tribe, or nation. The New Testament readings reach beyond such limited boundaries.

Joseph and his brothers could not get along. Theirs was a dysfunctional family. The blame can be assigned to all of them, even to Joseph who antagonized his siblings by recounting dreams that promised he would dominate over them and by parading before them the special coat his father had given him. But in Egypt years later Mercy brought them to a joyful reunion.

The psalm portrays a similar experience. “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity.” David’s family brought him grief. Recall the story of his son Absalom. He, too, had a dysfunctional family. Over and over in scripture we encounter poor family relationships. Looking about us today, we find that families still experience problems. This is nothing new. Dysfunction marks our own relationships as often as it marks the families of old. Nonetheless, our families, in spite of misunderstanding, often bring great joy. So if David wrote Psalm 133, he writes out of family history. For him family unity is like the high priest’s precious oil running upon his head down his beard, and over his collar. It is like the dew of Hermon. It signifies “blessing, life evermore.”

Paul also is concerned about human unity, but for him human unity extends beyond his family, beyond his tribe, beyond the Jewish nation, to the Gentiles. At all levels of humanity he sees human dysfunction. He employs the metaphor of imprisonment to show our state when Mercy comes to free all of us both Jew and Gentile. He says God’s mercy comes to us in the midst of our dysfunction because God has “imprisoned all [both Jew and Gentile] in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.”

For Jesus mercy is available not only “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” but even to a distraught Canaanite woman who speaks for her demon-possessed daughter. Matthew pictures this mother pleading for her daughter only to be told that Jesus’ mission is “to the lost sheep of Israel.” Desperately the woman asks to eat the crumbs that fall off the table of the elect. Immediately, then, Jesus assures her—and us as well, since we, too, are non-Jews—that both she and we are healed of our own demons.

Taking all our scriptures together we begin to see what Mercy looks like. But to fully understand, we need to review our own lives to see Mercy in action there. Scripture invites us to examine how we live narratives like these. What does Mercy look like to you and me? When have we seen her in our own life? Those are the important questions.

A friend—someone you don’t know—tells me she experiences mercy because she has turned her life over to God. She truly believes that when she prays the General Confession or when she privately asks pardon she is forgiven. Once she could not sleep at night. Now that she knows forgiveness she sleeps soundly.

Another friend finds mercy as he reviews his life journey. He thought himself far from perfect as a teenager. After marriage he was tempted to marital infidelity but resisted. “Why,” he says, “would I have wanted to destroy my family? These evils eventually come out.” He feels confirmed in mercy because a son actually had the grace to take his advice and pursue a career in medical technology. Now he proudly tells his father he has secured a good job at a university hospital. Based on his own experience, my friend can say, along with the psalmist, “How very good and pleasant it is when

kindred—in his case, his wife and son—]live together [with him] in unity.” He can enjoy their success with them.

One of the best examples I have found of mercy comes in Piers Ploughman, a medieval text I read with students. There Mercy, as a personified figure, comes from the west and encounters Truth who comes from the east. They begin a debate as to whether a sinner can be saved. The statements of Mercy and Peace are challenged by Righteousness coming from the north and Peace from the south. Clearly the inspiration for this debate comes from Psalm 85, which says that “Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (Verse 10, KJV). Eventually these figures come to understand how life triumphs even over death. Peace speaks and says she has come to free people from the grave:

Adam and Eve · and others more in Hell,
Moses and many more · mercy shall have;
And I shall dance thereto · do thou so, sister!
For Jesus jousted well · joy beginneth to dawn;
Love, that is my lover · such letters me sent,
That Mercy, my sister, and I · mankind should save.¹

The poem starts as the dreamer begins his journey “unholy in works” and goes, like many of us, “wide in the world · wonders to hear.” But at the end of the poem, after dreaming of Mercy and Peace, Truth and Righteousness, he returns home to his family. After watching the dance of Mercy, Peace, Righteousness, and Truth, the dreamer awakens on Easter morning:

Till the day dawned · these damsels danced,
That men rang in the resurrection · and right with that I waked,
And called Kit my wife · and Calot my daughter—
'Arise and reverence · God's resurrection,
And creep to the cross on knees · and kiss it for a jewel.'

This old poem shows, like our texts this morning, that we most often come to experience mercy in the context of our own family.

What wonderful hope God’s mercy and peace offer. Mercy and peace offer us the word of forgiveness; they assure us of life everlasting. How comforting when friends we have loved are dying, and when we anticipate that eventually we too shall pass away. Just this week such comfort sustains the family of Pastor Brad Whited. Brad was administrative pastor here for many years, and I am told he was one of the first to support this 8:30 a.m. worship experiment. We remember him fondly and extend our sympathies to the family knowing that in spite of death we swim together in an ocean of love and mercy straight into the heart of God.

¹ The Book Concerning Piers the Plowman, Tr. Donald and Rachel Attwater (NY, Dutton, 1957).
Downloaded on August 13, 2008, from The Geoffrey Chaucer Page,
<http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/authors/langland>.

I personally experienced a unique sense of mercy and peace. Going recently with my sister-in-law to a 5-day silent Franciscan retreat near her Northern California home, I heard the presenter speak of Moses and that burning bush that was not consumed. Early in life I took that story as a miracle that I would never encounter myself. But 30 years ago or more the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg gave a homily on our campus one afternoon. He spoke of the burning bush and suggested that perhaps the sun shone on the bush in such a way that it only appeared to burn. Annie Dillard speaks of a similar phenomenon in her early book Pilgrim at Tinker Creek when one day she saw a halo of light about a tree in her neighborhood. I have had similar experiences myself. Perhaps all of us have experienced such garden-variety mysticism—which really is not at all mystical save as we relate what we see to what we do not see. The important thing for Moses is not that he saw such a familiar sight, but that he experienced through it a call to liberate his family, the people of Israel who had been enslaved in Egypt. Moses helped his people understand that God is as close as the wonder he saw in his father-in-law's back yard.

St. Francis experienced a similar call when one day he stopped at a derelict, wayside chapel in his home town of Assisi, Italy, and saw the colorful crucifix there. Jesus is represented on that crucifix along with many angels and saints. Praying there before the image he heard Jesus speak to him in a tender, compassionate voice: "Francis, do you not see that my house is falling into ruin? Go, and repair it for me." Initially he took as his assignment the repair of the little church itself, but when he encountered the leper his vision broadened. He naturally found lepers repulsive, but the Church is built of people, not buildings. Francis realized that a leper, too, belongs to Christ's church. Indeed, he saw Jesus in the leper, so he went to him and kissed him. Then he spent time living among the lepers. Christ came very near to Francis both in the crucifix and in the leper.

So how does Jesus in his mercy come near me? Like Moses and Francis, I, too, have marveled at the wonder of God's world. As I looked over the grounds of the retreat house, I spied a Japanese Flaming Maple by the chapel. In magnificent shades of gorgeous red, it spoke to me of the beauty of creation. Whether the sun shone on it or not, it appeared on fire. Day after day I meditated on the grounds about me. Each day I saw more and more fire. I saw many red flowers, as well as orange, and purple, and yellow—all of which, each in their own way, had responded to the light of the sun by becoming enflamed. The buildings, topped as they were by red Spanish tile were also ablaze. Even the presenter's bald head shone, and the other retreatants about me glowed with ineffable joy. The whole place was on fire! Was it possible for me, too, to burn in the fire of God's love and mercy? The result, realized only toward the end of the retreat, was a reaffirmation of my long-term calling to a life of teaching and family.

Now as I grow more and more concerned about the shallowness of life in the world, as I grieve over threats to world peace, as I cringe at the coarse discourse and action that sometimes mars our political campaigns and even the current Olympics, as I worry about what we do to our environment, I return to the few days I spent on retreat. Yes, at first I was only surprised by the beauty of the world. But eventually I came to see that Mercy allows me to work for others in the supernatural beauty of the Kingdom of God that lies all about. Then, in spite of all the deficiencies of life today, in spite of my own sin and weakness, God comes near me and burns me with divine mercy. And I see men and women radiant with the peace of Christ. That peace envelopes each of you

today. Do you see your sin and weakness and the sin and weakness of others being purged in the fire of God?

The Bible is full of mercy, and we humans sing of it so often that when I went online to the Cyber Hymnal I got 991 hits—991 hymns that contain the word mercy. Perhaps this favorite, by Frederick Faber in 1854, comes most immediately to your mind, as it does to mine:

There's a wideness in God's mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in His justice,
Which is more than liberty.

For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of our mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind..

'Tis not all we owe to Jesus;
It is something more than all;
Greater good because of evil,
Larger mercy through the fall.

But we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness
With a zeal He will not own.

Was there ever kinder shepherd
Half so gentle, half so sweet,
As the Savior who would have us
Come and gather at his feet.

Or there is this lovely hymn, written by Fanny Crosby in 1873, that I have never heard sung:

Like the still quiet fall of the silent dew of night
On the leaves, that are folded to rest,
Is the mercy of God when it droppeth from His throne,
Bringing balm from the fields of the blest.

Refrain

Dew of mercy, dew of mercy,
Ever dropping, gently dropping from above;
Dew of mercy, how it cheers us,
Ever dropping from a Savior's love!

How do you encounter Mercy in your own journey? I invite you to see how close she is to you. Is she not in every breath you take, in every generous deed you perform? Take each breath and every good deed as evidence that you have been forgiven, healed, and restored to a place in the Kingdom of Love Christ initiates in this world.

Now may the mercy, peace, and love of Jesus remain with each of us.