

Mercy for Us All!
Matthew 9:27-33
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Wilton Presbyterian Church
Lent Week 3: March 7, 2021

She was called Mrs. T. She was the wealthy widow of a tobacco man who had died long before, and she remained as the sole resident in their old farmhouse in NC. It was 1984... The year between my year in Japan and my entrance into seminary. The chair of the deacons in my home congregation in Winston-Salem said Mrs. T needed a caregiver on weekdays, and would I consider it? I would be paid. I thought "why not?"

The next 9 months were filled with some of the most difficult and humbling days of my life. The first day, I discovered that Mrs. T had not had running water for some months... hence no ability to flush her toilets; She slept in 4 mink coats and her hoarding tendencies made her room, warmed by a kerosine heater, a fire hazard. In fact, the second day, when I found she had singed her eyebrows as a result of throwing an open container of kerosine in it... I removed it.

Mrs. T had been a grande dame in her day. She had led young women from Duke University on trips around Europe... teaching them proper etiquette and all about the finer things in life.

My sense was that if she had been more fully aware of how her life would be at this point, she would have been horrified... nevertheless, here we were.

My job, according to her nephew who lived 90 miles away, was to get her back out into her social circles of bridge and other things. Regular trips to the hairdresser and getting her mass wardrobe to the cleaners were among the first tasks, along with getting proper nutrition into her.

Mrs. T was pretty brutal to me in her comments at times, and she didn't like it when I took a break from her downstairs, watching TV... I could hear her calling her nephew and complaining that I was doing so...

But months into our time together, and after we had built some trust, one morning, as I was combing her hair and helping her put on her make-up, she whispered to me... don't let my friends know you have to do this for me. My heart broke. What Mrs. T needed... and what I learned to give her (sometimes reluctantly) over those long arduous 9 months, **was mercy.**

The stories this morning depict situations of people who have external needs: two men who are blind and a man who is mute with some sort of spiritual distress... What do the men in the first story plead for? Jesus have mercy on us. Jesus assumes that they are asking to be healed, and he says, "Do you believe that I am able to do this? To which they respond, "Yes Lord."

Mercy... it's an interesting word. But what **exactly** does mercy entail? Craig Rennebohm, founder of the Mental Health Chaplaincy and of program 15 that our congregants are currently taking, called **companioning**, calls all of us, as people of God, to be merciful. This is from his book, *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God*:

Mercy is a primary gift of the spirit. Mercy nurtures reconciliation and renewal in our lives. Mercy touches the hurt in our lives. Mercy reaches out and embraces our feelings of shame and embarrassment. Mercy acknowledges our grief and guilt. Mercy tempers judgement with wisdom and understanding. Mercy expresses the love of God, gentle beyond all measure and yet of such strength that nothing can separate us or negate our lives and worth.

Mercy flows from the compassion of God. God's heart is touched by our struggles, more deeply than we can imagine. God feels our every pain, suffers with us, and holds our lives as treasured. In God's care, our souls have eternal value.

*In the face of mental illness (and I would dare say... in the face of anyone who expresses vulnerability), **we are called to be merciful.***

And we are also called **to receive mercy**. In this Lenten series, we have been talking about holy vessels ~ our bodies, our minds, and our spirits as holy vessels in need of healing in this season of recovery.

Studies say that before the pandemic, one in four people reported experiences of mental health challenges. Now, as we move into the second year of the global pandemic, we remain isolated physically for safety reasons at the very time when a reported half of the American public report symptoms of depression and anxiety. This means that people in our congregation (and even the people leading our congregation) are hurting emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, and physically. Add to this the burden of caregiving, whether for children or aging parents, and pretty much everyone is feeling the extra stress and hardship of what it takes to survive a global pandemic.

Famed author and researcher Dr. Brene Brown says, "You either walk inside your story and own it or you walk outside your story and hustle for your worthiness."

Such profound words. I am reminded of the scripture from Mark Chapter 1, when the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism and affirmed him for all to see with the words, "**You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased...**" showing mercy through Jesus' inherent belovedness. That same statement is made to us... even in the midst of our stories which

life bestows upon us. From the inside out, we are beloved... no matter what we do or don't do; no matter what our outsides show—the amount of money we have or the lack of it; no matter what status we hold—or lack of it; no matter what job we have or didn't get; no matter what abilities we have, or what we struggle with—we are all beloved in God's eyes...

And when we “get” that? We'll be able to see that in another whom we may not, or society may not deem as beloved, and be able to be givers of mercy.

In this morning's story, Jesus asks the men: “Do you believe I am able to do this?” Jesus' question invites us to consider our own belief in transformation. He invites us to step into a renewed vision of our lives, to speak into being a new story, not be bound by the stories of the past, inscribed on us by others, that may be oppressing and limiting us.

“We are each a whole life story that is greater than any given moment and much more than our illnesses, wounds, troubles, or sorrows. Who we are, in turn, is part of a still larger story, the story of the world and human beings and eternity. We are part of this planet and the universe and a part of worlds we can't even begin to imagine.” (p. 107 Rennebohm)

During this Lenten season, we see the reaction of the crowd in the healing story. This week, the crowd was amazed and cried out that nothing like it had ever been seen before. How interesting that the crowd is “seeing” something for the first time, just like the blind man is brought to sight! Could it be that this is as important to the story as the ones who received physical healing? How could we open our eyes, figuratively, in new ways? What do we need to envision anew?

Might our communal discerning lead us as a church community to become a “health hub” through our ministry and mission? Perhaps the Spirit is leading us put our minds to imagining how we could continue to shine a positive light on the work of mental health. The needs are so urgent, especially now. Throughout this time, I invite you to explore with us the possibilities for a new or renewed commitment to a contribution we can make at Wilton Presbyterian Church to our larger community’s effort to recover from this past year and be givers and receivers of mercy!