

July 6, 2008

Shakespeare is surely right when he has Portia declare that “the quality of mercy is not strain’d” – that mercy is not *forced*, is not a thing *required*. Rather, it has the character of a *gift*, indeed being “an attribute to God himself”. And yet, mercy can become in our minds what Portia’s speech itself is – a beautiful *idea*, high and noble, much lauded but seldom practiced, much needed but rarely received. For mercy is as common and as rare as the poverty and the lowliness and the mourning which can hear and trust the promise of inheritance and consolation in the blessings of Jesus we’ve been hearing over the last few weeks. The mercy which matters is not a *noble* thing but a costly grace.

We don’t really talk much of mercy today. We are, for the most part, legalists. Our debates have to do with

the application of laws – rights to be exercised and responsibilities to be observed. In our hunger and thirst for righteousness and justice our natural inclination is towards the balance of such rights and responsibilities. If we do, from time to time, decide to give up on the pursuit of rights or justice for ourselves, it will usually be because it doesn’t seem to be worth the effort – it would be more costly for us to maintain the rage than simply to “let it go”.

And so, when for us something like mercy does cross our path, it is as a largely *negative* idea. The merciful one is the person who *doesn’t* do something – the one who doesn’t prosecute the judgment, doesn’t demand repayment or restitution. This sense of negativity has to do with the denial of what we might call the economy of exchange. This is the understanding that there are rules of engagement, rules of exchange which govern what we rightfully expect from and owe to each other. In such exchange we are largely interested in our rights, and these in relation to the responsibilities of others. As I give, so I expect to receive. As I suffer, so I expect restitution, or perhaps demand even comparable suffering of the guilty party: “an eye for an eye”. To be merciful, however, is to refuse to apply the laws and seek the justice which are part of the economy of exchange. Mercy, then, might even be said to be a type of *unrighteousness*, for it

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essentially tolerates *injustice* through forgiveness.<sup>1</sup>

Although Shakespeare broadly gets mercy right, his example of where it might be applied is a poor one. In Portia’s famous speech mercy is requested of the loanshark Shylock, a character who set the condition of the pound of flesh from his debtor out of malice and vengeance. He is no noble figure, and is held in contempt for the contract he wishes to enforce. Rather, as a hateful and vindictive figure, and all the more so because of the anti-Semitism of the play, he would really be thought to be doing *justice* by releasing his debtor from an unreasonable contract, and not really acting mercifully. Shylock

would suffer only the loss of vengeance, for he had already given up a claim on the financial debt in the contract, and

in the story a Jew’s vengeance on a Christian (*because* he is a Christian) is scarcely considered a matter of justice. When Portia calls on Shylock for mercy it is rather a cheap request. Much *is* at stake but, in the minds of all but the lender himself, not much is at stake for Shylock. Mercy will not cost Shylock much and, when the legal tables are turned on him, neither does it really cost much those who then have mercy on him.

Getting closer to the heart of the matter Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his reflections on this beatitude, speaks of the merciful as those who give their honour to another who has fallen, and take on themselves a share in their failure.<sup>2</sup> This way of thinking about what might be demanded of us in discipleship is not easy. For in fact we are talking here about the very life of God; talk about mercy is talk of the way of the cross.

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<sup>1</sup> To oversimplify the matter considerably, a distinction should be drawn between the injustices we ourselves suffer, and those others may be suffering. Mercy does not tolerate injustices suffered by others (Matthew 25).

<sup>2</sup> *Discipleship/Cost of Discipleship*, s.v.

It is easy to corrupt mercy into high-mindedness, the morally superior condescending to the morally deficient, but this is little more than self-righteousness. The mercy *God* shows, however, is of an entirely different quality. It is a drawing near and an embracing of what is unjust *in such a way as to take upon himself* the injustices and unrighteousness of human existence. Disinterested mercy which keeps its distance does

not to continue in failure that the love and grace may further abound, but to learn mercy ourselves. We do not, then, earn God's favour with our own mercy, but rather show it forth. The merciful are those who no longer labour under the burden of law, but those who have taken upon themselves the yoke of mercy, and become sources of righteousness beyond mere justice.

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nothing to change the real condition of the one we might choose to spare. But in his drawing near to us in Jesus, we see a God whose merciful work is actually to allow himself to "spill over" into the lives of those he touches. More than that, such is the extent of the crisis which God meets in us that we "spill back" into his life, so that Jesus dies our death, "even death on a cross" (Philippians 2).

Jesus is the merciful one who knew the mercy of God; we who have known his mercy and forgiveness are those God endows with his Spirit to continue in Christ's knowledge of God's mercy, and so to continue in God's work in the world.

God's mercy takes seriously the extent of loss and brokenness in which the world languishes. It gives up on justice because justice has failed, and will continue to fail. Justice seeks to set right and, in a sense, to change the past, or at least to blot it out. But mercy neither changes nor expunges the past; there is no changing what has happened, and no forgetting. Rather than wiping the past away, mercy makes possible a life-giving future which arises unexpectedly from failure and death. Whereas justice can merely lament failures, the *injustice* of mercy leads to a strange *celebration* of failure, because it has become the occasion of revealing a love which otherwise would not have been known – a love which is not immune to death but after passing through death finds life again.

*"...in the course of justice, none of us  
Should see salvation: we do pray for  
mercy;  
And that same prayer doth teach us all to  
render  
The deeds of mercy..."*

Blessed are those who have received mercy, for they may discover a share in the work of God, and become mercy to others. May God give increase to the number of those who have known this blessing, and share in this work. Amen.

The appropriate response to this revealed love is

### ***QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION***

- *When have you experienced mercy? When have you sought it, and not received it?)*
- *When have you felt moved to act mercifully? What did it cost you?*
- *What is the relationship between mercy and forgiveness?*
- *Where might mercy be called for in your life at the moment?*
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