

“Compassion and Mercy” Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
September 23, 2018 Bill Chadwick

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Oak Grove is a joyful, inclusive, compassionate community seeking to do justice, act mercifully and walk humbly with God. This is our new vision/mission statement, found at the top of your bulletin. Please say it with me and then we'll see if we have it memorized yet

We have been walking our way through our new vision/mission statement in sermons the last two weeks. We have looked at *joyful* and *inclusive*, today “compassionate.” I'm also going to add in the middle phrase from the second half as well, the “act mercifully” piece. So today we look at “compassion” and “mercy.” There is a lot of overlap.

First of all, WHY should we be compassionate and merciful? In the Bible we find the word “compassion” about 80 times and “mercy” or “merciful” about 200 times. Obviously, a key biblical value.

In the sermon on the Mount, in the translations of my childhood, Jesus commands those who would follow him to “Be perfect, as your Father in Heaven is perfect.” What's your reaction to that? “I quit!” is my reaction. Perfection ain't gonna happen, so why try? But more recent scholarship suggests that the old translation is incorrect. Many scholars today translate the Matthew passage not as “Be *perfect...*” but “Be *compassionate* as your Father in heaven is compassionate.” In fact, the equivalent passage in Luke is translated, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Com-*passion*: literally “with feeling.” To “Feel with” someone. To feel their pain. To walk a mile in their shoes.

In Hebrew, the language of the First Testament, the root of the word “compassion” is the same as that of the word “womb.” It has been suggested that to have compassion for someone is symbolically to carry them in your womb. I think of it as to consider that other person to be part of your family.

I vividly remember a story about a man driving along on the freeway and coming upon a horrible crash, which had just taken place seconds earlier. Cars were strewn around both sides of the freeway and one car rested upside down in the median.

Along with others, he stopped his car and jumped out to see how he might help. He saw that sticking out from underneath the overturned car was a pair of legs. A woman, judging by the shoes. He figured that the unlucky person must already be dead, but a few of them tried to lift the car off her. They were unable to do so. "Poor thing," the man thought. And he and the others turned their attention to helping other victims. But then it dawned on him where he had seen shoes like the very unique ones on the feet of the person under the car. And then he looked at the make and model and color of the color. "That person under the car is my sister!" He quickly ran up and down the line of people calling for strong people to come and help and gathered enough so that they were able to turn the car over. A faint pulse was found. The ambulance whisked his sister off to the hospital for multiple operations. Eventually she fully recovered. Only because he recognized her as his sister.

Jesus says they are all our brothers and sisters.

I try to remember this—not always successfully—when I'm not feeling very compassionate. We want to be compassionate people, don't we? But do you have times when you don't feel compassion? When is that? Why is that, that we sometimes don't feel compassion?

We talked about this Monday evening at the Men's Mentor Group. One of the guys noted that when you go online and read the inane, sometimes hateful, comments of other people, it's hard to have compassion for people we don't like. Yes, it is.

Let me offer two quick think-withs. In high school psychology class we watched a film about five college students who were recruited to work on a brief project together. They did not know one another. One of them had been planted in the group with instructions to disagree with the others, as they were trying to make decisions. He did so respectfully, quietly, but he voiced different opinions from the other four as they were doing their group project. After the assignment each of the men was given a questionnaire, which included, "How did you feel about your partners in the project. Which did you like the most and which did you like the least?" Who did they like the least? Exactly. All four of the actual subjects stated that they liked the disagreeing person the least. Again, he wasn't disagreeable...crabby and insistent. He was just disagreeing, voicing different opinions.

We like people who think like we do. Right? Why? I have to believe that this largely comes out of evolutionary biology. Thousands of years ago our cave people

ancestors had to stick with their in-group for safety from other clans. Doing so kept them alive. Can we evolve beyond that? Agree to disagree, without being disagreeable? Just like Jesus invites us to move beyond our innate fight-or-flight response to conflict, to a higher Third Way of solving issues, so Jesus invites, no Jesus *commands*, us to love our enemies, and certainly those with whom we disagree. Or do bad things to us. (I'm not saying we put up with abusive behavior... I'm saying we have compassion.)

Second. Some of you have heard entire sermons about this: it is my contention that even the most reprehensible behavior is, in fact, understandable if you know the whole story. I'm not saying the behavior is justifiable, but understandable. That's my theory behind why God is so good at this forgiveness business. She knows the whole story. God knows the brokenness behind the horrible behavior.

So I encourage us to be compassionate with even people we don't like. Because Jesus told us to. "Be compassionate," he instructed. "Love and pray for your enemies," Jesus commanded. If you really hate somebody's politics, pray for him or her. Not pray to have them change to be like you. Let's just ask blessing on the person. And let God figure it out.

Another insight from the Men's Mentor Group Monday night (open to all men 25- to 35-years old, by the way—third Monday of the month): Bill Pomroy noted that he used to not give money to panhandlers because he figured, "He'll just take my five dollar bill and buy booze with it." I used to worry about it. I don't any more. I just give him the five bucks." (See why I recruited Bill to be a mentor?)

When I see people at intersections with signs asking for help, at least on my good days I think: "That's Jesus." Remember Jesus' words from Matthew, chapter 25: "Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these, my sisters and brothers, you have done it unto me." In a few weeks we will be putting together bags of supplies to give to those asking for help.

Okay. We've looked at why to be compassionate.

Our vision statement declares that Oak Grove is compassionate. Are we? Let's list the ways: Loaves and Fishes, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, Homework Connection, Cornerstone, Meals on Wheels drivers, space for Al-Anon, Oasis, VEAP, the general mission budget of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Syrian Presbyterian Church, International Village Clinic in India, the Pastor's Discretionary Fund, giving rides to folks to church or to doctors or radiation appointments, the

Friend to Friend ministry, Lunch Bunch, Prayer Shawl Ministry, mission trips, and on and on. Hundreds of volunteer hours and financial giving to the tune of more than \$125,000 each year. You are, indeed, compassionate.

Now let's take a quick look at the "act mercifully" part. What does it mean to act mercifully? It means that somebody deserves punishment, and we have the power to inflict it, but we choose not to. We choose instead to act mercifully.

I find it fascinating that many people prefer strict justice over mercy, as far as other people are concerned. Many people want "an eye for an eye." I've come to realize that there are multitudes of people who don't like the story of the Prodigal Son, because the wastrel son doesn't get what he deserves. Instead of going to work as his father's servant, his father throws him a party. That bugs the heck out of people.

The Beatitudes are in the center of the Sermon on the Mount, the absolute core of Jesus' teaching. Thus, the Beatitudes are a window into the very heart of God. In one of them Jesus declares, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

Do you want to *receive* mercy? I do. I don't want to get what I deserve. I want mercy.

Now, this question: Who is the hardest person for you to forgive, to have compassion on, to grant mercy to? For many of us, it's ourselves. Amen?

Friends: You are fashioned in the image of God. You simply are the *beloved, cherished child of God*, and you are loved, just the way you are. I beg of you to claim this truth. Be gentle with yourself. Be compassionate and merciful to yourself. If you want help with that, please come talk to Mary or me. Or a therapist. We can refer you.

Finally, as we think about compassion and mercy, remember this: You may be the only word of compassion that someone hears today. You may be the only word of mercy, of hope, someone hears today. Jim Carroll says that each follower of Jesus, through the way we live our daily lives, each of us is the Fifth Gospel. Thus, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Jim or Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Carol or Ann or Al.

Let us be faithful in receiving compassion and mercy and passing it on. Amen?