

Mercy

This parable is one of those stories that is so familiar it's impact can be pretty blunted.

A big key to interpreting the parable is the question it answers. First the lawyer asks, how do I inherit eternal life? How do I tap in to the power of God's reign forever? The dialog after that indicates the lawyer does know the answer to that.

But then comes the key question that Jesus' parable answers – "and who is my neighbor?"

Luke makes the law expert out to be sort of conniving. But it could just be an honest question, too. Just who is my neighbor? How far does this love your neighbor thing go?

At the end of Jesus' story, it turns out the Samaritan was a neighbor. We don't really appreciate the shock value of that. The Samaritans were seen by many Jewish people as inferior...people of mixed ethnic background who the Jewish people thought didn't really belong in the family of Israel, even though they traced their history back to the same ancestors.

But in Jesus' story, not only is the Samaritan the only one who shows mercy, the supposed cream of the crop in Judea – the religious elite – proved themselves to be seriously lacking.

So, it turns out the looked-down-on Samaritan was in fact the neighbor. The law expert wanted to find the boundary. But it appeared there weren't any.

What I really want to focus on today is what made that Samaritan the neighbor. It was mercy. Jesus asks, which of the three passersby was a neighbor to the victim?

Uh...uhm...the one who showed him mercy I suppose.

To be a neighbor is to show mercy. To be a neighbor is to receive mercy. Mercy is at the heart of loving the neighbor.

Mercy is like compassion. But mercy is defined as showing compassion, when actually the expectation or inclination might be punishment or harm instead.

The expectation in the parable is that the Samaritan would walk by. Why help one of those arrogant Jews? Maybe the Samaritan even wrestled with that very thing.

But in the end, he didn't walk by. He showed mercy.

As I've worked with this story, I've more and more come to see how central mercy is to Christ's mission. Mercy is what finally heals, even when everything has gone to hell.

And it's not like being merciful started with Jesus. We so often think of the Old Testament God as somehow different – more vengeful. I get why. But most often what God is in the Old Testament is heartbroken. Heartbroken because the people that God loves so much turn their backs on their maker and treat one another with utter lack of mercy and compassion.

Granted there are some difficult Old Testament passages to deal with. God's righteousness can sometimes clash with God's mercy. But in the end, it's mercy that wins. And when that happens, God's righteousness wins, too.

Jesus said to his followers, be merciful as God is merciful. So listen to these old Testament verses.

1. [Exodus 34:6](#)

The Lord passed before Moses and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God **merciful** and gracious, **slow to anger**, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

2. [Nehemiah 9:17](#)

The people refused **to** obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their necks and appointed a leader **to** return **to** their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready **to** forgive, gracious and **merciful**, **slow to anger** and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them.

3. [Psalm 86:15](#)

But you, O Lord, are a God **merciful** and gracious, **slow to anger** and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

4. [Psalm 103:8](#)

The Lord is **merciful** and gracious, **slow to anger** and abounding in steadfast love.

5. [Psalm 145:8](#)

The Lord is gracious and **merciful**, **slow to anger** and abounding in steadfast love.

6. [Joel 2:13](#)

rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return **to** the Lord your God, for he is gracious and **merciful**, **slow to anger**, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment.

And from Jonah who is angry because God relented and didn't destroy Nineveh

Jonah prayed **to** the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled **to** Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious and **merciful** God, **slow to anger**, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment

You get the idea.

Time and time again, the sins of God's people bring on tragic results. Time and time again, God's anger gives way to compassion and mercy. God forgives. And then God leads them out of the desolation their sin has brought on them.

It's out of that same compassion and mercy that God become human, Jesus Christ, let the mercilessness of humanity nail him to a cross.

It is that mercy that ultimately heals and saves us. The Greek word for salvation - σωζω – also means to heal.

We are healed by the mercy of God in Christ. In the end, through the mercy of God, we are given the gift of eternal life in a completely healed world. In the face of that, our tendency to be unmerciful seems absurd.

And yet that is our human tendency...to want retribution...revenge even. To create groups of people we think are not quite worthy of our love. And treat them accordingly.

I'm on the Planning Commission in Waverly and one of the things we deal with is municipal codes. Along with the many codes are stories of neighbors who showed no mercy. Fences or other structures built just to annoy or retaliate. Dogs allowed to poop on neighbors' yards.

And don't even get me started on Community or neighborhood Facebook pages.

Mercy doesn't seem to be the natural inclination for many of us.

And to be fair, mercy can be really complicated. When someone commits a serious crime against someone else, we don't show mercy by just letting it go. That's not very merciful to the victim or others at risk.

Sometimes in this imperfect world, mercy means setting an appropriate sentence. But it also means working with the person who committed the crime to heal whatever in them has gone wrong. Mercy means focusing on restoration rather than retribution.

Mercy can bring healing to both victim and perpetrator.

When you get down to it, mercy may be the only thing that can heal our nation...even heal the world. When everyone just seeks retaliation and revenge...when powerful people use their power to crush their perceived enemies...when the strong victimize the powerless...it just all ends in a vicious cycle of violence and retaliation that is never ending.

Mercy breaks that cycle. Mercy does the unexpected. There's a principle in spirituality that says hurting people hurt other people. And healed people heal other people.

We as God's people have been shown infinite mercy. On the cross, Jesus bore all the consequences of human mercilessness and broke the chains of violence and retaliation. It's Jesus' mercy that heals us. And as healed people, we can heal others.

We can never be sure what the future brings. Right now it seems like it's anybody's guess what next week will bring, let alone the next year. But whatever happens, mercy will be the only thing that can pull us through.

We may not be ready to show mercy to some at this point. Healing is a process and not a flash. And there are wrongs that are going to have to be set right.

But we can meditate on the boundless mercy of a God who is gracious and merciful...a God who bore a cross to wrench our hearts out of the dark, vicious cycle of violence and retaliation...a God who then raises us up, healed, and able to practice mercy to those around us.