

## Mercy & Grace

A few weeks ago we heard the beginning of the story of Job. How he was used as a chess piece in a game between God and Satan. At first Satan was told he could not harm Job physically, and so he took away all of Job's livestock, crops and for good measure, killed all his children at the same time. Job did not flinch in his love of God. He did not repent in his faith and belief. So Satan upped the ante and Job was allowed to be harmed, but not killed. He was covered in sores from the top of his head to the tip of his toes and we left him last, sitting in a pile of ashes, dressed only in a loincloth and scratching himself with a shard of pottery. Poor Job!

Remember, the bet was that Job would not curse God, no matter what happened to him, in his life or physically. Job did not curse God but he did rage and wonder - a lot. The book of Job has 42 chapters. The book falls into five sections: a prologue (chapters 1 and 2); the dialogue between Job and his friends (3–31); the speeches of Elihu (32–37); the speeches of Yahweh and Job's reply (38–42:6); and an epilogue (42:7–17). We last hear from Job in chapter 1. Today we are at the end of the book, in Chapter 42. Job has been asking "why me" for quite some time and then God shows up...and takes Job to task.

The first part of the reading today is from the last part of the conversation between Job and God. We skip a small section about Job's so-called friends and then finish up with the epilogue where, because of Job's faithfulness to God in never cursing God, he is rewarded with twice as many blessings as he was before Satan took them all away.

Next, we hear of Job's children, blessed to him later in life.

The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. He also had seven sons and three daughters. He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch.

Job 42:12-14, NRSV

His daughters are named, but not his sons. Something very unusual in the Hebrew Scriptures and even in the Gospels. Jemimah means "dove", Keziah means Cassia after the spice and is understood to represent female equality as Job's daughters each received a share equal to their brothers after their father's death. Keren-happuch means child of beauty. It is said that Keren-happuch was the most beautiful of all women in the land. This may also represent that Job was fully healed after being so seriously ill in body and mind.

Job was tested to the core of his being, and although he did rage against the evil and pain being inflicted upon him he did not ever, not once, curse God. And as such, even as God was chastising Job, he was shown God's grace as he was being told to "gird his loins" or "put on his big boy pants", and stand up after sitting for so long in the ashes. This is God's grace.

Next we hear the story of Bartimaeus, a blind man begging at the city gates. He has heard of this itinerant preacher from Nazareth who could do incredible things, he could heal people of illness and Bartimaeus decides he's going to seize his chance when he hears what he believes to be Jesus' voice.

He calls out "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' (Mark 10.47, 48, NRSV) Even though the crowds and even the disciples are telling him to be quiet he ignores them and calls even louder, "HAVE MERCY ON ME". Keep in mind that a child born with a "defect" such as blindness would have been considered cursed by God, likely as punishment for a sin committed by their parents.

Beggars were despised and pitied and among the poorest and most vulnerable population. Their living was entirely provided by strangers as there was no social safety net. Bartimaeus knew he had one chance to be healed, and he put all his faith in God in calling out to Jesus. He refuses to be ignored and pushed to the back of the crowd. He refuses to be silenced into invisibility. And his persistence is rewarded. Jesus calls him over. Then asks a rather peculiar question "'What do you want me to do for you?'" (Mark 10.51, NRSV)

Could he have been expecting Bartimaeus to ask for a silver coin, or food, or a blessing? Was he testing the crowd for their reaction to this poor beggar after they had hushed him and his response was to be louder?

Bartimaeus' reply "My teacher, let me see again." (Mark 10.51, NRSV) He knows he is with no ordinary preacher. He doesn't need a hand out, he needs a hand up, an opportunity to support and care for himself. And so, in a very practical way, he asks for his vision to be restored. And just like that his greatest desire is fulfilled - "Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way." (Mark 10.52, NRSV) This is God's mercy. Jesus granted Bartimaeus' plea for mercy.

It is worth noting that this is Jesus' last miracle. The passage before this one is where James and John were trying to decide who was more important...the one we heard last week. The passage that follows this one is the "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem. How is it that we know this name of this particular beggar whom Jesus healed, and yet we hear of multitudes of men, women and children being healed and none of their names are provided to us. What is so special about Bartimaeus?

Could it be that it's a combination of Jesus' last earthly miracle, which warranted Bartimaeus' name to be revealed?

Could it be because of the nature in which Bartimaeus was healed? He was healed because of his faith - the unyielding mercy which he pleaded from Jesus. And once his sight was restored he followed Jesus. In fact, as Bartimaeus is the last earthly miracle of Jesus, he is also the last disciple. He has decided to follow Jesus to the cross, preparing to give his own life as he once again has the gift of sight.

Grace and mercy are two things we each receive in abundance from God and yet, how often do we recognise these gifts? We understand grace to be a spontaneous gift from God, it is generous, free, unexpected and undeserved. It is a priceless gift, a bill paid in full. If we feel shame and regret for things we have said and done or not said and left undone, that excludes us from the gift of grace which comes completely from God.

There is no way we can repay this gift, other than to live our life in the blessing of grace which we can then, in turn, give to all we encounter. The gift of grace is one of God's richest blessings.

God's mercy is something else entirely, it is not receiving the punishment we deserve. In Bartimaeus' case, he's pleading for mercy because he believes he is being punished for his parent's sins. In the 21st century we cannot properly grasp the devastation he is feeling. For a child to be punished BY GOD for the sins of his parents seems particularly repugnant in our current understanding of God's love.

It could be said that grace and mercy are two sides of the same coin. On one side there is grace, God's richest blessing which we do not deserve and can never repay. Then there is mercy, which is the love of God in extending us a much lighter sentence than we deserve for our own sins or shortcomings.

Is it fair to say that grace is divinely human and mercy is humanly divine? Let's put it this way: suppose someone attempted to rob your house. You learned that the robber was in a desperate situation and didn't intend to do any harm. Their action was from a place of desperation; not an intention of harm. Instead of calling the police, you chose to pardon the thief and let the matter go – that's mercy. Then you gave them some food and a few dollars to get them through this horrible time – that's grace.

In a world where mistakes are swiftly punished, and goodwill is only for the worthy, grace and mercy are an absolute necessity. Both restore humanity to a state of worth and growth, while not keeping score or tucking mercy away as a chip that can be cashed in at a later time.

The giving of grace is an act of selflessness; the giving of mercy is an act of pardon. Both are meant to be used lavishly, and neither are to be used as weapons i.e. I chose to pardon you of this error, therefore you owe me. Nope, then what is extended is not mercy, but a favour. Big difference.

Let the lessons of Job and Bartimaeus spurn you to act with grace and mercy, just as God has done in their lives and just as God continues to do in ours. Let us extend the same generosity of spirit and generosity of self.

Why?

Because it is exactly what Jesus would do, did and continues to do.

Give it a try. It will, unequivocally, change you, just as you have been changed.

Let all God's children say Amen. **AMEN!**

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Job 42.1-6, 10-17

Mark 10.46-52