

January 12, 2020

Isaiah 42: 1-9

Matthew 3: 13-17

Mercy Me

The Reverend Melissa Anne Rogers

There are memorable movie moments, and then, there are those scenes that grab you, and in their particular poignancy, they point you somewhere. One night in 1984, my church youth group joined our pastor to talk about one of the defining flicks of our generation, *The Karate Kid*, a classic story of good versus evil. Martin Kove's impressive performance as a brutal martial arts teacher made him the Darth Vader of the 80s. A ruthless karate sensei, he imprints his motto, "no mercy" on the hearts of his boys, especially his star student Johnny. Outside of karate class, Johnny's gang of guys taunts Daniel, a poor Newark transplant just arrived in sunny California in a beat up station wagon with his single mom, hoping for a new start. Daniel is scrawny and vulnerable, a bruised reed, a dimly burning wick. But he is humble, and funny, and a popular girl sees his charm, which set off a cycle of abuse and bullying by Johnny's friends that nearly kills him. The Super at the apartment complex where Danny lives, the Christ-like Mr. Miyagi, a man who has suffered himself, sees this, and agrees to teach Daniel karate for self-protection. Fast-forward to the valley-wide competition and the final championship match between Daniel and Johnny. Despite a teammate of Johnny's badly damaging and bruising Daniel's leg, Daniel hangs in there. With a high tolerance for pain and a will to win, Johnny can't finish him. In the scene that set us teenagers talking, at the time out, Johnny's sensei orders him to return to the mat and "sweep the leg." To "sweep the leg" means that Johnny must end this match by breaking Daniel's bone. Cruel, illegal, and unethical, Johnny hesitates. *No mercy*, sensei says. When his leg breaks, our hearts break too. For mercy is what Daniel — and Johnny - most need. Johnny needs someone like Mr. Miyagi — a father, a mentor, who can model mercy and humility for him, not an abusive teacher who violates his humanity. When Johnny breaks Daniel's leg, two bruised reeds are broken. I remember asking my pastor if there are really people in the world like that sensei, people without compassion.

No mercy. Probably the worst advice ever given, but words that undoubtedly began my wheels turning toward the ministry, and to the church. There are people like sensei out there, and I wanted to greet them coming, to point them to a place I understood to be a house of mercy, a home for the broken and needy. This 14-year old has not changed at 50. I believe that to be human is to be merciful, even as we are merciful despite being human. Moments of nastiness, times of pettiness, those emerge from us all. When frustrated, hangry, or cornered, we can withhold compassion. When wounded, we can be vindictive. We can demand justice at the cost of mercy, even though they are conjoined companions to be patiently pursued together. When we fail to nourish mercy, to tend and treasure it within us, it wanes. That's what the church is for. Tending, growing, giving, living —mercy.

To be human is to be merciful. If we aren't born with certain psychopathology, mercy is embedded in us. Sadly, some of us are taught to tuck tenderness away and never let it show, and some grow up with people who beat compassion out of them. Even when we cherish that compassion within us, mercy competes with other

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motivators — greed, scarcity, a love for power, a thirst for vengeance, a fear of failure, a belief that toughness is a virtue, low self-confidence, high expectations others lay upon us — and so much more. Throughout the history of the world, and our own histories, our mercy is measured by the surfeit of our selfishness and our desire for dominance. Even the church has the capacity to withhold mercy, or be misguided in our application of it. If only we weren't such a messy lot of human beings who would practice what we preach. Mercy is not without complication, and in the pursuit of justice, it may have many shades of gray, as the Catholic cardinals have learned, when multiple parties are wounded and defensive. That complexity does not diminish its value but makes it that much more precious. Mercy is our calling as God's creatures, God's will for us, our choice if we are to be whole.

For some, mercy is the deepest calling. They see a dimly burning wick from far away and rush to cup their hands around it. Mother Teresa was an angel of mercy for the poor, the sick, and the hungry of Calcutta, and gave her life, setting a new definition for compassion. Less glamorous, little known mercy occurs everywhere the protectors of bruised reeds live, layered throughout all the losses we bear. U.S. Marine Lt. Colonel Steve Beck is one of many military personnel who spent many years going to families with loved ones killed in action, remaining with them through the days to follow to help them begin to cope with sadness. Beck's description of his job to interviewer Terry Gross about the book, *Final Salute*, describes the tireless work of mercy. "I'm delivering the worst news that they could possibly hear. What drives me forward is knowing the pain that they're going to go through cannot possibly be compared with the minimal pain and discomfort I'm feeling. I know that the pain that I'm about to cause with this news and my responsibility to America to take care of that family is more important than any discomfort that I have." Faith Fowler, at Cass Community service in Detroit, stood in this pulpit and preached her merciful heart out. First Pres has many angels of mercy, in less conspicuous ways, more grinding and giving in a local sense, and also plenty human. You know them, those living compassionately and selflessly day in and day out here at First Pres. Through mission, pastoral care, working for dialogue on tough topics that could divide us, in the passing of the peace, in the pursuit of a warm welcome to everyone who comes here with no exceptions, creating liturgy and music and art that makes mercy visible and audible — you are merciful. Last year, when my husband, who has Alzheimer's, was critically ill and in the ICU, we kept it quiet. Yet somehow, one of you showed up to walk my dogs that morning, just in case we needed a day off. Mercy me, I thought. I see you who go to a member's home twice each week to help dye the hair of a woman still proud but too frail to get out of bed anymore for hair appointments. I've seen you open your homes to family members of hospital patients at the UM Medical Center or the VA Hospital, going to have a meal with them and give them respite. You've made sure an old street person in tattered clothes got the best seat on Christmas Eve and left church with your winter coat. When an usher lost his son-in-law in an ATV accident down in Louisiana, leaving three children behind, just weeks before Christmas, other ushers quietly sprang into action to send the widow a large financial gift so that the boys would have some extra-special presents on Christmas morning.

Shirley Burgoyne died recently. A long-time member of this church and orchestra, Shirley enjoyed deep friendships, many that she lost because of her tough demeanor and lack of a filter. Shirley was prickly, and she could be in your face if she disagreed with you, and her house was a mess. But in the words of her son, she had a deep desire and unwavering ability to "take in strays." Folks who were on their own, with no place to go ended up at her house. She could spot a castoff a mile away — and bring them home. Despite her rough edges, she moved towards the marginalized and opened doors for the oppressed, taking the key case in Michigan all the way to the state Supreme Court which ruled that being in a same-gender relationship was not grounds to take someone's children away from them. Every bruised reed — even whole fields of them — she would nurse back to health. I bet her middle name was mercy.

Shirley, you, me — we are all modeling the mercy of Jesus, who Isaiah introduces to us as God's *Suffering Servant*. Isaiah's prophecies have particular theological histories, but we find Jesus in them. Whether this

enigmatic one described in the four servant songs of Isaiah refers to one ruler, several people, a whole nation, we read it as a prophecy fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, the baby who at warp speed, two weeks after we cupped our candles to welcome him, is now thirty years old, being baptized, commissioned, sent off for ministry. Named and claimed by the Holy Spirit, drawn out of the water by the human hands of his cousin, Jesus moves fully into his calling. The vocation that was clear, the ministry he would inhabit until his death, was revealed to him in part through the prophecies of Isaiah he read as a boy. Isaiah sharpens our own vision, too, to see that the waters rolling off Jesus' skin as he came up from the Jordan River, as the heavens opened, were waters of mercy, of justice, of humility.

Hearing Isaiah's prophecy and watching it unfold at our Lord's baptism — we come to know whom God shall send. God will send us merciful people who will pursue justice, especially for those in prisons either forced on them by society, or of their own making. God's chosen ones will bring light into darkness, and open eyes and hearts to see bigotry and hatred and work to end it. Their cause of compassion will be done without shouting, breaking, or fainting — until all is done. Contrast this with current models of leadership throughout the world. Shouts and threats and taunts and tweets are the new way of dialogue. Treaties are broken, torture is used to interrogate. Braggadocious words do not mask a lack of imagination, an absence of empathy, and soulless self-centeredness.

If employment rises and our personal fortunes are up, we'll let mercy fall. But, our communities and families are changed. There is a movement in this country to do away with the mercy rule in sports. Parents and coaches now say that the mercy rule — not allowing some to run up the score to protect civility, to keep kids from shame or humiliation— accelerates the *wussification* of America. They argue the mercy rule does not allow kids to learn that failure is a part of life, puts a stigma on losing, and undermines the spirit of competition. To be merciful is to be wussy.

The church has to stand up for mercy. God chose servants who were merciful. God makes us to be merciful, too. And then, our bright, beautiful, boundless God sets about enlarging our capacity for mercy and expanding our ideas and boundaries around it. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life," we say together when we read the 23rd Psalm in unison at memorial services. Ed Searcy writes that the word for follow in the Hebrew is actually the word *pursue*. Mercy shall pursue you all of your life. Mercy is means that seeks us out. It pursues lost souls and lost congregations. It is close on our heels. Its breath is on our necks. Mercy does not happen by chance, but by choice, and we are empowered by the Spirit to turn around and greet it with open arms.

Elders and deacons and Stephen Ministers, and you — Peggy, and Bill and Carol and Ginny, Dave and Paul and Ann - you are called to bruised reeds and dim wicks even when you are them. God needs your wisdom, your faith, your tenacious unyielding to all that would distract or mis-empower you. Beyond baptism, Jesus did that. Beyond our baptisms, we are called to the creative cultivation of mercy in our contemporary and complicated world. Mercy never was easy, or simple, or straightforward. And mercy can be very murky at times. Old Yeller taught us that. We live in a world with what is called "mercy killings." How does the church define mercy and euthanasia? 1 in 10 people are living with dementia. What is mercy for them? Saline resident

Jim Mangi, whose wife has Alzheimer's, spoke at First Pres this week about mercy for those with dementia. For months, when his wife asked about her deceased sister, he'd speak the truth — *she died*. After months of inflicting fresh grief on her - mercy morphed into a new answer. "She's traveling." "Ah, good," she'd respond. When one of our widowed members in a memory care unit asked the aide when his wife would be coming, she smiled and told him tomorrow, sparing him the pain of losing her again and again. That is mercy. Murky mercy. Palliative and hospice care, withholding treatment or nourishment so that someone who wants to die, is ready to die, can do so, is merciful. Death itself can be merciful. Lying can be merciful. That is mercy. Murky mercy.

Jesus comes out of the water, rises up, newly baptized from the waters of the Jordan. He enters into a ministry saturated with the vision Isaiah bequeathed to him and to us, a vision of leadership guided by mercy. Murky or not — Stephen Ministers, Elders, Deacons, Humans — this is our calling, to a mercy that knows no bounds. Jesus came up from the water. You will come up from these steps, hear your name, feel the Holy Spirit claim you, and get out on the mat of our community to work for compassion. Your legs will not be broken, but your hearts probably will. Do mercy anyway. Let that be your rule.

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