
The Mercy of Believing in Mercy

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Proper 25 – Year B

Here's a parable from my own career as a college professor. Imagine that one day in the classroom I was un-characteristically berating and even bad-mouthing my students for the way they had responded to the homework assignment that week. Un-characteristically, I say, I might have vilified them! ☹

And then imagine how my own behaving badly might elicit the following responses in the minds of my students—three very different types of responses:

- One student might think to himself: He's right; I'm that guy: no-good, stupid and lazy.
- A second student might think to herself: Who does Smith think he is, talking to us that way—that tyrant!
- Finally a third student might think to himself: Poor Prof. Smith! He must be having a really bad day today. 'Bless his heart.'

Well, that's the end of my parable! I'll leave you on your own for a few minutes to find a moral of the story! ☐

Meanwhile, let's notice that today's theme in our gospel reading is divine mercy. Mercy means compassion or kindness, forgiveness or leniency. That compassion is highlighted when blind Bartimaeus shouts out at Jesus as he's passing by, "Jesus, Son of David, have **mercy on me!**" (Mark 10:47)

Now there's something about that third student in my parable that reminds me of our gospel today. That's because in that gospel we see two different groups in the crowd, or maybe the same group behaving differently at different times: (1) the first group resisting Bartimaeus as he begs for Jesus' help and (2) a second group encouraging Bartimaeus to go to Jesus. The second occasion is when we hear people say to the beggar:

"Take heart [or take courage]; get up, he is calling you" (v.49).

Now what can account for the difference on that second occasion, and what accounts for Bartimaeus' courageous follow-through—'his throwing off his cloak, then springing up to come to Jesus" (v. 50)?

I think that the key feature here is something we find expressed in Psalm 27:13.

What if I had not believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living?

Yes, church family: 'What if any one of us had not believed that we would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living?'

Now I want to highlight two great hymns of the church that express this ability to 'believe in the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.'

The first hymn is "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing."

Author and Text: [Robert Robinson](#), 1735-90; Hymn Tune: [Nettleton](#)

1. Come Thou Fount of every blessing
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,

Call for songs of loudest praise
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
Mount of God's unchanging love . . .

Notice how that verse affirms how fixed or fixated we church-goers are on that unchanging goodness and love; a goodness and love that attracts us back to praising God and to worship opportunities again and again!

And then there's this final verse that also encourages our hearts to believe in divine goodness, grace and love:

3. O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let that grace now like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.

Yes, our hearts are also capable—too, too capable—of wandering from that divine goodness that we love, worship and adore. Too often we doubt its efficacy and reliability, don't we? Too often we yearn, rather, to be sealed in its enclosure and sustainability.

Now, 'sealing our hearts for God's courts above' brings me to a second classic hymn of the church that also invokes God's mercy for us. Here also only two verses are needed to showcase our theme.

Our second hymn is "There's A Wideness in God's Mercy."

Author and hymn history: [Frederick Wm. Faber](#), 1814-63; Hymn Tune: [St. Helena](#)

1 There's a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice,
which is more than liberty.
There is welcome for the sinner,
and more graces for the good;
there is mercy with the Savior;
there is healing in his blood.

Here we are reminded of the magnitude of both the compassion and the suffering of our Lord, and how they are connected: how he conclusively demonstrated his love for us by undergoing such great suffering for us.

Finally we can end with this verse, where God is praised for the divine ability to surpass our own capacity for mercy:

3 For the love of God is broader
than the measure of the mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.

If our love were but more faithful,
we should take him at his word;
and our life would be thanksgiving
for the goodness of the Lord.

Yes: "If *our love* were but more faithful!" Well then, we would be invariably capable of extending to others the kind of mercy, care and compassion that my third type of student displayed as described in my parable above. Similarly there's the mercy that the blind beggar Bartimaeus cried out for and received in our gospel story today. Finally there's you and me here today, mercifully blessed in our own right to 'believe in the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living' (Psalm 27:13).

Now, my sisters and my brothers, of course we're not able to sustain believing in God's enduring mercy in our

own strength. However, we are always capable of loving our Lord who heralds and embodies such mercy. So, may that love never cease to embolden us both to cry out, and to receive, and to extend to others as well that divine mercy. For that mercy, the mercy to believe in mercy, we pray again and again:

“Lord in your mercy . . .”

[Together:] “. . . *Hear our prayer!*”

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