As One with Mercy | Matthew 7:1-14; 24-29
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February 10, 2019

I once taught a student who drove me batty. Every day, I would cringe when she’d call my name; I’d avoid or quicken the 1:1 check-ins she needed. It was her voice, her inability to follow along, her ceaseless energy. One day, as I internally lamented my choice to teach third grade and dove deep into a spiral of anger about how tired I was, how much money I was spending on supplies, and how frustrating Daniela was, I had what can only be described as an epiphany. I didn’t like Daniela because Daniela was too much like me. Speck. Log.

When Jesus rounded out his Sermon on the Mount, he got a little punchier, don’t you think? Perhaps the day had drawn on and he was tired or perhaps he could see that the crowd began to scratch their heads and become more interested in the birds overhead than his words because Jesus - our Lord and Savior - comes at his congregation with comedy. “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye?” Hyperbole, for sure, but is it hyperbole if it is our daily bread?

What I love about the last part of Jesus’ sermon is how he’s trying to pack it all in, trying to get as much as he can out there so that this crowd - this newly inaugurated into the ministry of sharing God’s love crowd - can be fully equipped to do the work they’re called to do. It reminds me of parents calling after their children as they walk out the door, “Don’t forget to turn in that note to your teacher and be nice to your sister and wash your hands - its flu season - and please, eat that apple I put in your lunchbox and when you get home, start the laundry. Love you!” Jesus is eager and ever mindful that we have the human propensity to forget so he’s giving the crowds all the goods, hoping that a handful will sink in as they pivot into their new life.

I am 98% certain that if I were there that day, I would not have heard Jesus’ words before this joke because I would’ve been looking at my neighbor and wondering why they chose to wear that cloak on a day like today and isn’t it odd that she would feed her child such processed, packaged junk so - like the crowd - I would need a joke to pull me out of my perpetual ill-perception. How could I hear “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged” over my very accurate and important contextual processing? How could I hear it when it is all I know how to do for myself?

The preacher and professor Thomas Long says this of Jesus’ sermon, “The words ‘do not judge...’ in context are not a prohibition against moral discernment but an invitation to participate in a process of
moral growth. Jesus requires that before we call for the transformation of someone else, we be transformed ourselves.”

Judgment is necessary and Jesus it not asking us to stop judging but rather to use judgment for what it is for - discerning what is right and good and healthy and for prospering. It is how we’ve survived as a species - practicing sound judgment by avoiding poisonous berries and running away from vicious animals. But beyond that? Beyond decisions that aid in our prospering, safety, and health?

The Good News as I know it is that Jesus keeps on inviting people to a life that is far more abundant than we can imagine. He invites people to follow, to eat, to listen, to walk, to fish, to rest, to laugh and he invites people to transformation which is exactly what’s happening here, in our story and - I hope - in our lives today. Jesus is inviting people to take a look inside and when we do, have mercy on ourselves and in turn, have mercy on others.

Jesus is inviting us into self-awareness, a gift that comes when we take the log out of our eye and consider it - discern it. Consider why it is there: What stories have we told ourselves or what stories have we believed about ourselves to keep that log lodged for what feels like eternity? Is it there because some person or some church taught you that that way was the way and you’ve spent your life ignoring the nagging suspicion that there has got to be more? Is that log there because - as I believe it for myself most days - the Good News is too good for someone like me to deserve it? Or is that log there because the energy it will take to remove it is a risk too dangerous to take?

When I removed the log from my own eye - that’s not it - when Jesus removed the log from my eye and I could consider the treasure I knew in Daniela - it was a gift of mercy that flowed in a ceaseless stream upon my heart. Mercy I needed when I was Daniela’s age and rarely gave myself and marginally received. Mercy I needed when I was a struggling student and told not a soul less I look like a failure. Mercy I needed when I, like Daniela, was over eager with classmates and thus awkward to say the least and so clung to my teachers who showed me a wide welcome no matter what.

I wonder if you - if we - need a bit more mercy in our lives? Mercy that shows tender concern for ourselves and - once we can move again without that log getting in the way - moves us towards tender concern for our neighbors. “Instead of a finger poked in the neighbor’s face, we reach out mercifully to wipe the neighbor’s eye.” See, we reach out because God has reached in and shown us mercy. We reach out because once we’ve been washed in those ceaseless streams of everlasting mercy, we realize it is Good News so good to share that everyone deserves it because it is free and flowing and it is God.

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I want to close with a passage from writer Anne Lamott’s book *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy*. But I invite you to close your eyes to hear it and let that log - whatever it may be - fall out. You don’t need it anymore. You never did.

"Pope Francis says the name of God is mercy. Our name was mercy, too, until we put it away to become more productive, more admired and less vulnerable. We tend to forget it’s still there. It’s our unclaimed selves, in the Lost and Found drawer, access to another frequency, like a tuning fork. It startles you when you hear it. You look up and around and respond. It’s part of human nature, the startle reflex. Grace and mercy build on this, on nature. We startle awake. This is part of the mystery, that the humane, humanity, human bodies, are where we experience transcendence and God, restoration, the inclination to serve those who are suffering. We reach out as we are reached out to.

This all looks so ordinary that you might miss it. It’s so daily. You don’t need special music and a Hollywood production and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. You don’t need the Canadian fjords, the Grand Canyon, a newborn baby, although these can be helpful. You don’t need to go to Senegal. Immediacy and inspiration can be found in the dairy aisle at Safeway [and I would venture even Wal-Mart]. It probably looks like people saying hello, making eye contact, letting others go first. Ordinary human daily ways, but moving more slowly. It looks like me with a few free minutes, deciding not to fill something in. Instead, I may close my eyes, drop to a quieter plane, or look up into a tree or the sky. Even a moment’s transcendence changes us. Everything is different afterward because we deep-dove, were there in downward, inward, higher places. So we know now. We remember.”

Friends, may you remember and in your remembering, may you be as one with mercy - mercy for yourself - for your sweet, loved, God-made self - and mercy for all those around you - for the sweet, loved, God-made bodies that drive you *batty* and that drive you to remember: God’s mercies are from everlasting to everlasting. Alleluia, Amen.

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