



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**

FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“You Matter”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Matthew 25: 31-40; Luke 10: 29-37

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In the tenth chapter of Luke’s gospel, we find another of these moments in which a leader or strict adherent to the Jewish traditions is trying to challenge Jesus in some way or another, in this case Luke notes him as ‘an expert in the law,’ and the man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus draws the man’s attention to that great commandment – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.” Of course, that’s not enough for this man, so he presses on, and this is where we pick up the conversation in verse 29.

But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 30 Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” 37 He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10: 29-37)

It’s a fascinating parable. There’s all sorts of fodder in there that one could delve into when it comes to reflection, discussion, preaching... There’s the question of the priest and the Levite who ignore the man in need – the issues of their own responsibilities, obligations and duties to maintain ritual cleanliness that might have played a part in decisions that they made. One could argue that intervening would have compromised their higher calling and that those men believed they were being true to God’s will in their lives by avoiding the bloody mess of that man lying on the street. There’s also the fact that the question Jesus is asked is who we should treat as our neighbor, but the one he answers is what it means to act like a neighbor. There’s a lot you could do to dig into this passage. For today, however, my focus is pretty simple – in that there was one man in this story who actually stopped and set aside his distractions to tend to this man in need.

And, whether we realize or not, that is something we fail to do, in our day-to-day lives, far too often.

But, let me take a step back for a minute.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” (Matthew 5:7) As we continue through this summer series of looking at the Beatitudes through the lens of the parables – seeking parallels and themes that might offer new thoughts and perspectives on those familiar words from the Sermon on the Mount – that’s the one we come to today. *“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”*

Now, to start, I want to simply own that we are not going to tackle the second half of this phrase today. There’s something of a karmic implication to that Beatitude – that we get what we ‘deserve.’ And I think that’s a question and concept worth unpacking at some point. Somehow implying that it is the merciful who will be the ones to receive mercy (and by implication, perhaps, not the rest) is something worth exploring. But, we’re not going there today. Today, I’m much more interested in the call than I am the consequence, because I think that’s the part that speaks deeply to these lives that we live in the year 2025.

So, we need to look at that word, ‘merciful.’ I think that ‘mercy’ is a tricky word. In the context of our Christian theology and faith, it often carries a particular meaning. Of all of the sermons and sermon series that I’ve shared over the years, the one people bring back up to me more than any other is our Lenten series on forgiveness from a few years ago. Specifically, I shared in that series that notion that, ‘grace is receiving that which we do not deserve, while mercy is not receiving that which we do.’ In many ways in Christian theology and terminology, that’s what mercy has come to mean – being spared of some detrimental repercussion. When we talk about God having mercy on us, we are generally talking about God not punishing us for our misdeeds. Similarly, if we talk about having mercy on one another, we are generally leaning into that forgiveness territory of not seeking retribution for one another’s errant moments.

The catch, of course, is that there is a whole other side of this word, ‘mercy.’ I didn’t have it listed as a reading for today but, in Luke 18 we hear that story of that blind beggar who cries out to Jesus from the side of the street, yelling ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.’ In that moment, of course, that man isn’t looking for forgiveness. He’s not seeking to be spared of some punishment for his misdeeds. He’s seeking care. He’s seeking pity. He’s asking Jesus to stop, to turn away from the many things that are pulling his attention in that moment, and he’s asking Jesus to have compassion for him. All of this is to say that there is a difference between the theological construct of ‘mercy’ and the Christian stance of being ‘merciful,’ and this Beatitude is about the latter. This Beatitude is about care. It’s about taking pity. It’s about turning away from the many things that are pulling our attention and having compassion for those around us. Or, if I can say it another way, it’s about deciding that the other is going to matter to us!

There’s a lot that can be said about that parable of The Good Samaritan, but at its core it is a story of those who did not stop and the one who did. They may have had their reasons. There may have been arguable justifications for the choices they made in that moment. Fundamentally,

however, Jesus is clearly and plainly lifting up that Samaritan who took the time to stop, to take pity, to have compassion, to show care – to show that that beaten man mattered to him! Similarly, the story of the sheep and the goats that Jesus shares in Matthew 25 brings us this litany of circumstances in situations in which one might have cared for the other – the hungry... the thirsty... the imprisoned... Each is different in their need, but the story is the same. No different than the Good Samaritan, the person who is celebrated by Jesus in this parable is the one who took the time to stop, to take pity, to have compassion, to show care – to show that the other mattered to them.

Allow me to put the most simplistic of faces on this... Many of you know that I try to generally keep my office door open. If I'm not otherwise engaged in something that can't be interrupted, I try to keep my door open for those who want to ask a question, chat, or just drop by to say 'hello.' The other thing I try to do when that happens, however, is to step away from my desk. Now, I'm not 100% with this, but when someone drops by my office for more than just a quick wave from the door, I make it a point to get up, move away from my desk, and walk towards them. This is, by now, a fairly natural act for me – but it began years ago as a very specific discipline. Why? Because I know that if I don't do that, my eyes are going to veer back towards the work on my screen and I'm going to want to click that that link, fix that word, finish that sentence, or do some other subtle thing that I believe I can do while still paying attention to the person I'm talking to. All the while, I'm failing to fully truly treat that person as though they matter to me.

It seems a small thing – perhaps a bit silly, and it most certainly doesn't equate to the heart and effort of that Samaritan who stopped everything to aid that beaten man on the side of the street in Jesus' story. Still – it's the constant reality of our lives. Our lives are filled with distractions. Our moments are laden with things clamoring for our attention. We're watching television on our phones – we're reading emails on our wrists. The smartwatch revolution has normalized people paying attention to texts from others in the middle of a conversation with you. I think I've spoken before about the annual meeting of the MA Association of Congregational Churches, years ago, when one of my colleagues – who was the presenter at the meeting – stopped in the middle of his presentation to take a phone call. Not an emergency – just a call. We scroll through social media while at dinner with friends. We play silly games on our phones while chatting with family members. And this is just the tech – it doesn't get into the schedules, the demands, the mental distractions, and the litany of other things that draw our hearts and minds away from that person in front of us who, in that moment, wants to know that they matter to us.

Now, we can't ignore that next step. The food to the hungry... the aid to the distressed... the visit to the imprisoned... these are all essential to our carrying out of that Christian compassion to which we are called. What I am trying to draw our attention to this morning, however, is the predicate to that greater act. Mercy has a specific meaning in the construct of Christian theology, and being 'merciful' has a particular sensibility in the life of a Christian disciple. Being merciful is showing care... taking pity... sharing compassion... Before any of that happens, however, being merciful requires stopping – it requires turning away from the litany of distractions of the moment – and it requires making the conscious choice that this person in front of me is going to matter to me! The nature of the distractions will vary from each circumstance to the next, and in the end there may be some greater act of compassion that's called for. That call to a Christian

attitude of being merciful, however, starts with the specific choice of stopping – of looking away from the distractions – and of deciding that the person in front of you, whatever their need may turn out be, is going to matter to you.