

"Know Mercy?"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, May 1, 2011

I want to talk about mercy this morning, because mercy changed my life. You may not understand, because you may have never needed mercy. I did. I began telling one story in our newsletter, but I left out some important details.

I don't know what it was like where you grew up, but I used to get bullied a lot. I'd get tripped on the way down "jock hall." That's where all the athletes hung out during lunch. It was always the upper classmen picking on us freshman and sophomores. Occasionally, I'd get shaken down for some of my lunch money, or teased for not having the right kind of tennis shoes that all the cool kids were wearing (that was a bid deal back then). So, I did what any other intimidated, insecure young boy might do in response: I sometimes picked on the kids who were smaller than me. At the time, that just seemed like the natural order of things. When I could get away with being the dominator, I did my part to continue the cycle of abuse. Plus, I had to do *something* to recover my lost lunch money – or I'd starve. My point being, that I'm a minister today partially to atone for the sins of my past.

One day, at the age of fourteen, I walked into a classroom and noticed that the janitor had left a can of wasp killer in the window sill. And lo and behold, the teacher was late, and there was a freshman in the class who I liked to tease when I had the chance. He was easy picking. So, feeling cocky, I grabbed the can of Raid and started chasing the kid around the classroom, telling him, "Hold still, you have some wasps in your hair." It was all fun and games until I bumped into a desk and accidentally pushed the spray nozzle, and the poison spray got into his eyes. He started to scream and barrel over, just as the teacher walked in. He was rushed to the nurse, I was ushered to the principal's office.

I had a feeling in my stomach like I'd swallowed a bar of soap. It wasn't that I was going to the principal's office, I was used to that. At that time in my life, I got in trouble so much I was on a first name basis with all the school secretaries. The problem was that this time I knew I'd really messed up. The boy could go blind or have permanent damage to his eyes. There was no excuse; I was being a bully, and someone's life might be severely damaged by my actions. I was sure I was going to be suspended, if not expelled. I just wanted to crawl into a hole and never come out. I was rehearsing what I was going to say to the principal and to my parents. When the principal called me in

to his office and I stood before his imposing desk, I felt three feet tall as I explained what happened. The words he uttered changed my life. This was even before we knew if the boy was okay. He said, "Marlin, you're right, this was very foolish and very dangerous, but I know you well enough to know that you did not do it with malice of intent to hurt him. You would never do that – and I'll make sure that the boy's parents know."

At the moment when I thought my life was about to be changed forever, it was – just not in the way I expected. I was given a second chance. But more importantly, I could feel *what it was like* to be trusted and respected. At a moment when I was feeling at my lowest...I went into that office feeling stupid, mean, clumsy, and ashamed of myself, and I left with a sense that the principal could see that deep inside, I was a person with integrity and character. Instead of telling me I was good for nothing, which I would have had to agree with at the time, he affirmed me. I was in shock, and I remember it felt so good to be seen in that way that I never wanted to lose that feeling. It changed me. Thank God, the other boy was okay, and he accepted my apology, and we were fine after that.

Relationships have the power to transform us for better or worse, and mercy has its place. Did you ever notice how in our hymnal, in the song Amazing Grace, there's a little asterisk and we're given the option to change the words from, "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a *wretch* like me," into "...saved a *soul* like me"? Some Unitarians resent being labeled a wretch. Not me, I sing wretch, because I know the feeling of being a wretch, and receiving grace instead of punishment. Do you know the feeling? I like to think I'm in touch with my "inner wretch". Believe me, it's not just from that one story, but you get the idea. But I also realize that you may not know this feeling, this need for grace or mercy. You may not be able to relate to this sense of feel like a wretch, and I suppose that's good. More power to you! I also know that not everybody likes the idea of mercy. It can be a troubling concept, to let somebody off the hook. And to be fair, letting people "off the hook" is not always the right thing to do. Giving someone a second chance is just that: "a second chance," not a third, or fourth, and certainly not a fifth or fiftieth chance.

When a person in our lives has an active addiction, or chronic financial troubles, or other chronic characterological problems, then mercy can quickly turn into co-dependency and enabling. In which case, it's a false sense of mercy. Repeatedly bailing someone out – of jail, financial problems, or other "tight spots" they keep getting themselves into – stops being mercy when it stops helping the person and starts harming everyone, including you. We all know how it goes when someone is given one more chance, then another, then another... but doesn't make changes. Accepting people's rationalizations for their bad behavior is not mercy, its stupidity, and it can become an addiction in

itself. Pretty soon the person who thinks he or she is being merciful finds that they're becoming preoccupied with the problem person and their problems. Enabling is its own kind of addiction.

In addiction, the addict continues to do the behavior (drugs, gambling, whatever...despite serious negative consequences). Well, the enabler also keeps enabling despite serious negative consequences of their actions. It's an addiction. An addict keeps using despite emotional, financial and sometimes legal problems. In the same way, the enabler keeps enabling despite their own emotional, financial, and sometimes legal problems that stem from their enabling the person. It's become *their* addiction. The enabler can't seem to stop what's destroying them and their life either. The addict begins to have problems at work and so does the enabler, who starts losing concentration on the job due to their preoccupation with the problem person. Does anyone here know what I'm talking about?

I see this all the time. Pretty soon it's not just the addict, but the enabler who is suffering from physical problems like headaches, stomach aches, and stress. Now the enabler has an obsession: it may not be a drug, but it's their preoccupation with the problem person, which increases until it starts to dominate their thoughts and dominate their life just like an addiction. While the addict's tolerance for the drug increases, and the enabler's tolerance for bad behavior increases. Enabling is an addiction, and just like the addict, the enabler often can't see they have a problem. If it's allowed to continue, it leads to a sense of hopelessness and despair. That's not mercy, that's co-dependency. Mercy gets a bad rap because people don't know the difference. Here's the thing, mercy is a decision to choose connection over disconnection.

Let's look at the story of Joseph and his brothers from the book of Genesis. Joseph was just seventeen when his jealous brothers threw him down a well, then sold him into slavery and told their father he was dead. Fast forward many years and, unbeknownst to his brothers, Joseph has become a wealthy, powerful ruler in Egypt (second only to the Pharaoh). When a famine strikes Israel, Joseph's brothers come to Egypt looking for a source of survival, and lo and behold, they find themselves begging Joseph for help. Of course, they don't recognize Joseph at first (they certainly don't expect it to be him). In the end, Joseph decides against revenge and pay back for what his brothers did to him, and instead he chooses to reconnect by showing mercy. By the end of the story, he's reunited with his brothers and his father, which is what he really always wanted. That's the point of mercy; it's a decision to choose connection rather than estrangement. It's a decision to seek wholeness rather than separation.

In my story from high school, it was about giving me an internal sense of wholeness or integrity. It was about connecting me to what was good inside, rather than leaving me broken. In the Joseph story, it's about choosing to have a family, and to be kind rather than to live out his days separated and alienated from his family.

In the case of South Africa, when Apartheid ended twenty years ago (remember Apartheid was a system that made the minority white South Africans the rulers of the country for centuries, while the majority, black South Africans, could not vote, or go many places, or get certain jobs or schools, and the society was racist, violent, and unjustly segregated like America before the 1960's), the greatest fear of the white South Africans was that if their black adversaries gained power, they would take out revenge on them for the decades of cruelty, abuse, and killing. On the contrary, they demonstrated the largest act of communal mercy ever documented in human history. When Nelson Mandela was freed after twenty-seven years in prison for opposing Apartheid, twenty-seven years locked up in a cell like an animal for trying to end injustice – I take that back, no one would lock an animal up in a cell for twenty-seven years – when Mandela was finally freed, he could have called for vengeance and retribution. He did not; he called for forgiveness.

He called upon his old friend Bishop Desmond Tutu, and asked him to chair the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The rules were simple: the perpetrators had to tell the truth, the whole truth, and their victims were given the opportunity to forgive, and they could be given amnesty. In other words, mercy. Many of the atrocities were truly horrific. A policeman named van de Broek told of how he and his fellow officers shot an 18-year-old youth, then burned the body. Eight years later the police officers went back and took the father of the boy, and forced his wife to watch as he was incinerated. She was in court to hear this confession, and was asked by the judge what she wanted. She said she wanted van de Broek to go to the place where they burned her husband's body and gather up the dust, so she could finally give him a decent burial; van de Broek agreed. She then added another request: "Mr. van de Broek took all my family away from me, and now I have no one, but I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month, I would like for him to come to the ghetto and spend a day with me, so I can be a mother to him. And I would like Mr. van de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him too. I would like to embrace him so he can know my forgiveness is real." Spontaneously, some in the courtroom began singing Amazing Grace as the elderly woman made her way to the witness stand, but van de Broek did not hear the hymn – he had fainted, overwhelmed.ⁱ

Our relationships have the power to transform us, for good or for ill. Mercy is one of the most profound ways we can transform and be transformed. Our Universalist Forebears would say, if we mere mortals have the capacity to be so merciful and forgiving, how much more capable is God? Universalists claimed that God is merciful, and therefore God will always choose love and connection over estrangement and separation, and that's why they proclaimed that there is no hell. If we mere humans can open our hearts enough to forgive people who have inflicted unforgettable damage upon us, would God be so vengeful to inflict endless suffering and torment on everyone who has failed on life's complicated journey? No way. How could Jesus tell us to love and forgive our enemies, but God doesn't?

As my colleague Forrest Church wrote, "We can sift a spoonful of evidence for hell from the Bible, even as we can ladle out dozens of arguments for slavery. Neither, however, meets the requirements of the biblical spirit, whose imperative is Love." In the end it's Love that is the root of mercy. And if there is one purpose that makes being alive worthwhile – it's learning to love. That's why we're here – to learn to love. And while some people might argue that God is not love, we can all agree that love is divine.

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.
We've no less days to shout God's praise...then when we first began.*

So don't just sing, but shout, shout for glory! Shout aloud for glory; brother, sister, mourner, friend, (all who know what I'm talking about) shout glory hallelujah!

Lord have mercy!

Praise Life!

Praise God!

You've got a friend. You've got a friend in *need*. You've got a friend *indeed*. You've got a friend in *me*.

Have mercy. I love you. Amen.

ⁱ [see [Rumor 88](#) 'Love made van de Broek faint' in *Rumors of Another World* by Philip Yancey]