

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Genesis of Our Faith: Mercy
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Genesis 18:16-33; Luke 10:25-37

They looked pitiful. There in one of the sheds were a bunch of seedlings that had outgrown their pots, were withering, and looked like Charlie Brown Christmas trees on life-support. That was one of the sights that greeted our soon to be son-in-law, Brendan, when he began his new job with the Tacoma Parks Department. When he saw them, he had three choices as to what to do about those trees. First, he could simply ignore them. They had obviously been there for a while, and no one was caring for them so why should he be concerned. Second, he could choose to assume that it was someone else's job to care for them since their health was not part of his job description. Third, he could have mercy on them and do something about the seedlings in order that they thrive, even if no one else cared or had their care as part of their job description. I realize that my use of having mercy on trees might sound a bit odd, but mercy is a rather simple concept. Mercy means taking something or someone who is withering and helping them to flourish. Mercy is taking someone or something that is dying and giving it life. Mercy is taking someone or something that ought to be forsaken and remembering and restoring it. I offer you those definitions of mercy and the three choices before Brendan because they are part of both our stories this morning.

Let's begin with Abraham. Abraham has been hanging out with God and God muses to God's self that God needs to go down and see just how bad the people of Sodom are. Evidently the people of Sodom had become known for the kinds of evil that would cause God to get ticked off and want to remove them just like a surgeon removes a cancerous tumor. Abraham is also evidently aware of Sodom's reputation. At that moment Abraham is faced with the same three choices as were faced by Brendan. First, Abraham could choose to ignore God's visit to Sodom. After all, he didn't live there. Second, he could assume that dealing with God and Sodom was someone else's business...maybe that of some angel or other heavenly being. Or third, he could choose to show mercy by intervening in some way on behalf of the citizens of Sodom.

Our next story is the fictional character that we have come to know as the Good Samaritan. He is a businessman with deadlines to meet and mouths to feed. One day he is headed out on one of the most dangerous journeys in the time of Jesus, traveling the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. While on the way he comes across a badly beaten Jewish man. Again, the Samaritan is presented with three choices. He could ignore the bleeding man because to stop risked the Samaritan's own life. Second, he could assume that helping the man was someone else's business. After all the man was a Jew and not a Samaritan and so the Jews should take care of him. Third, he could show mercy by stopping, rendering aid, and caring for the man.

In each of our stories then, the people were confronted by the three choices. Which choice did they make? In each they chose to show mercy. Brendan showed mercy by, on his own time, repotting the trees then transplanting them in local parks; taking trees that were dying and helping them live. Abraham, for his part, showed mercy by intervening on behalf of the people of Sodom so that even the guilty who were on the point of death might live along with the innocent. The Samaritan chose to show mercy by risking his own life and wealth to help bring back from the brink of death a man whom most people would consider to be his enemy. And in each case their choice reflected that which God desires...because God is a God of mercy and desires God's people to be people of mercy. We know this because in the Abraham story God is willing to show mercy. God is willing to let the guilty go if Abraham can find even ten good people in Sodom. Mercy is God's nature. We know that God is a God of mercy because when Jesus finishes his story and Jesus asks who acted like a neighbor, meaning who did the will of God by loving neighbor, the religious lawyer replied, "The one who showed mercy." Which, by the way, has always made me wonder why this is not the story of the merciful Samaritan...perhaps because it is easier to be good than merciful?

Each day we are faced with these three choices. We are faced with the specter of those who are withering and dying. Sometimes it is in person when we see someone on the street corner asking for money. Other times it is the children in Foster Care whom Kate and Tom Thoresen remind us need our help. Soon it will be all the individuals and families who will be homeless because of the end of the eviction moratorium. These and tens of thousands of others need mercy. And so we are faced with the three choices; to ignore, to assume helping is someone else's job, or to show mercy. Which should we choose? Well, my answer may surprise you. Sometimes the answers ought to be to ignore them or to assume that it is someone else's job. I say this because we cannot bring everyone back to life. We cannot save everyone. We cannot intervene for everyone. We cannot house everyone. Even Jesus could not heal and feed everyone he encountered. The challenge, though, is to not let those two answers of ignoring or assuming others are always someone else's responsibility to be our only answers. The challenge is to be open to mercy. It is to be open to those moments that God sets before us when we can show the mercy of God. It is to be open to those moments when our abilities and resources allow us to be merciful.

My challenge to you on this day then is this, to ask yourselves, am I open to mercy because I follow a merciful God?