

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Wonderful News for the Merciful
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Exodus 25:10-22; Matthew 5:7

There is just something about a good chair. Look at the chairs around your home. Think about what caused you to pick that chair for the space it is in. Think about the chair you like to sit in the most, what makes it so perfect? When I was in college there was one chair we all fought over to study in because it balanced a book and a bowl of ramen perfectly on the arms. Chairs are important to the design of any room. When we redid Calvin Hall we had eight different chairs that the staff all sat in to pick which one we would buy in bulk. A lot goes into picking the chairs we sit in.

Some chairs hold onto their significance long after their usefulness ends. I have been to museums and seen the chair in which the declaration of independence was written and ones in which great scientific minds thought through the problems of the time. They are just chairs, yet we stare in awe and recognize they once held the weight of the advancement of humanity, comforting the sitters through their work. Chairs and human culture go hand in hand. Every great archeological site has found the chairs that once cradled that land's people. Every time and place have need for a chair.

These past few months I have driven everywhere with a chair in my car. I put it in the back seat at first for a specific outdoor event, but its presence has offered me many more opportunities since then. It has allowed me to stay longer than I planned in places with people I have missed, and given me a last minute excuse to stop and have a solo picnic between errands.

The simplest of chairs holds immense power. When you nervously walk into a room and there is an open chair, you suddenly feel relief. An open chair is enough of a welcome to make us feel like we belong there. When someone pulls up a chair to sit next to us, we feel wanted and worthy.

So I think that it is incredible that in God's grand design for this ideal worship space God includes a chair. The design that God lays out for Moses is intricate to say the least. God has thought about every measurement, every material to be used, every space of the room and its function. God has been dreaming about the day this place is built. In the Holy of Holies, the place where God meets with the priest, the representative of the people, God includes a chair. The chair says to me that these meetings won't be quick, standing huddles to check in and a quick exit back to the heavens. God wants to sit and listen and build the partnership.

In the translation we read today, this chair is called the "mercy seat." Now when I first heard mercy I thought about a football team dominating the game so outstandingly that the losing team pleads for mercy. Mercy as a call of surrender for the game to end and for the embarrassment of defeat to stop. This is what comes to mind because this is how mercy looks to most of the world. It looks like someone on their knees, hands clasped in front of them begging for those over them to stop the harm they are causing. Mercy is then granted from the more powerful to the weak.

But this mercy seat paints a very different picture than that understanding of mercy. The ones who are thrown to their knees at the sight of this chair are the powerful. When formidable armies see the mercy seat, the lid of the ark of the covenant, they tremble. Mercy in scripture is not about the powerful graciously halting destruction. Mercy is a third team, a stronger partner, showing up to help the struggling team play the rest of the game clock.

The ark of the covenant sends the powerful running because they realize God is such a regular visitor among these people that they have a special chair for when God shows up. A chair they bring everywhere with them because the chances that God is showing up to help is good. The enemies do not grant mercy; they run away at the prospect that mercy is on the way to turn the table against them.

In scripture, mercy is when a strong partner shows up to help. It is an act of partnership. It requires both parties to pull up a chair and sit together in the struggle. Because of this, mercy does not promise the problem will go away, or that the partnership means there will never be bad days. What it does is promise to be on our side during the fight. It is God pulling up a chair to be on our side.

It is God coming to earth to be on our side. It is Jesus dying on a cross to forever seat himself on our side.

Mercy is not something an oppressor can give us, it is the gift of a partner committed to taking a seat on our side through it all.

I saw a video this week of parents who redid their son's bedroom as a gift. Friday, they sent him to stay with grandparents for the weekend and they got to work. This boy was obsessed with John Deere tractors so they had a whole design around the green and yellow logo and shelves on the walls for all his tractor collectables. The parents worked around the clock to have it ready for him by the time he came home.

When the big reveal happened they set up a camera to catch his reaction. The boy walks in, and for a moment joy spreads across his face, then he realizes he didn't get to be a part of the transformation. His eyes fill with tears and he sniffs, "I didn't get to help paint."

The parents thought they would save him from the mess of redesigning. They would do all the hard sleepless work and he would be able to enjoy the final product. The boy however felt cheated out of the process. He didn't get to help paint.

Mercy is a partnership. God could redesign the world while we are away for the weekend, but then we won't get to help paint. God wants us to be a part of the process of mercy. Even the messy, hard, hurtful moments, God wants us to be included in the transformation. That is why mercy requires a chair. Mercy takes time. It takes time to build someone up who is feeling weak. It takes time to listen to their story and surround them with enough love for them to begin feeling strong again. It takes time sitting side by side as partners for mercy to transform someone.

And just as God pulls up a chair to sit on our side, we are also asked to be the ones pulling up a mercy chair alongside someone else in need. Mercy is meant to flow to us and through us. This beatitude says blessed are those who are merciful because they will receive mercy. It seems like an odd barter.

But what Jesus is affirming is that mercy is best when it is in motion. We can get our fill of mercy and be satisfied, but when we pull up a chair next to someone and offer them mercy then our giving is replenished with more mercy.

Here's a modern parable for this concept: Let's say at age 18 you got a choice. You could get a bank account with 1 million dollars in it or a bank account that could only hold a maximum of 100 dollars but every time you spent the 100 another hundred was deposited. We, of course, are choosing the one that will be replenished as we spend. We can never call ourselves millionaires, but we are going to be well taken care of. And we can care for others.

Mercy is a bank account that gets replenished every time we pull up a chair and offer mercy to others. When we sit with someone and listen to their struggle, God sits and listens to us. When we encourage one another through the hard times, God encourages us. When we walk in partnership with others lending our strength and surrounding them in love, God does the same for us.

Let's take a moment to think about the chairs God is asking us to sit in. Who among our partners, which of our relationships need an infusion of our strength? Where can we pour out some mercy and make room for more of God's mercy in our lives?