



Date: June 11, 2017

Title: "Mercy Me, Part 1: Love Mercy"

Scripture: Micah 6:8, Matthew 5:7, James 2:12-13

Description: Do you want to have a warm, generous heart? Mercy is your only hope.

Sometimes I get hungry, but I don't know what I'm hungry for. I can't just shake it off, forget about it and get back to my reading or back to work or back to watching the Braves lose. I'm hungry. So I stand in front of the refrigerator, my gaze roaming the shelves for possibilities. Nope. Or the pantry, where I scrutinize the shelf where we keep snacks. Nope. Nothing appeals to me. But I'm hungry.

When my wife can't identify what she's hungry for, she concludes she must not really be hungry, so she just leaves the kitchen. That is so crazy. If I can't figure out what I'm hungry for, I eat everything in sight. Surely one of those things will turn out to be what I was craving!

You ever get hungry, but it isn't about food? Your life gets hungry, but you can't figure out what you're hungry for. You're looking for help, but you're not sure what kind of help; you're searching for answers, but you're not sure what the questions are. You walk into your closet and stop in your tracks. "What was it I came in here for?" No way you're going to find it! So you're bound to come up empty-handed.

Except sometimes you don't come up empty-handed. Sometimes you stumble across just what you needed to find. That's my sermon: you're not going to find what you're hungry for. It finds you.

I've concluded that what we're looking for is mercy. Mercy is what we get when what we're looking for can't be found, then it finds us. Mercy is our only hope.

I hate that. I would have rather chosen almost anything else than mercy. I wish joy would come from being able to figure things out, because sometimes I can figure things out. Or joy would come from identifying other people's faults, because I'm really good at that. I wish what I was looking for was approval, or safety, or relief from

pain. I was raised to look for all those things, but eventually I realized they didn't work. You've realized that, too, haven't you. Most people, as they get older or face the last stages of cancer make that discovery: that approval, or figuring things out, or assuring safety for ourselves and our loved ones just don't work. They're not what we were really hungry for.

Where, then, do we turn? Where do we go when we're afraid, confused, lost, or just numb and weary? There is only one answer. The answer is always mercy.

The frustrating thing is, I tried mercy already. I started out trying mercy. As a little baby, I came into this world with mercy for nearly everyone, including stray dogs and cats and the tadpoles in the creek out back. This didn't last. By the age six, I put away childish things.

Our neighbors owned a dog they named "Mostly." It was mostly beagle, and it was mostly a good dog. It bit me only occasionally. Thus, it terrorized me always. At around age six, I grew wise in the ways of the world. When I saw Mostly, I began to carry a stick. Don't walk out—I never, ever struck that dog. Not once. But I menaced that stick with all the deterrent threat a six year old can display. I told that dog that mostly I was a gentle child and loved animals, but don't push me.

Age six was when I gave up mercy as a way of life and took up other attributes: strength, aggressiveness, and the threat of violence when necessary. The adults in my life told me to. Self-protection is the only way to survive, they taught me. That, along with its sidekick, revenge. "That'll teach you," was my favorite saying. "Wait till next year," became my mantra, especially after an Alabama-Tennessee game.

I was wrong. I have come to believe that I am not hungry for victory or revenge or even safety. I am hungry for mercy, and the world is too. Mercy is our only hope.

But the storms of conflict and blame and criticism are just so much more impressive and dramatic. Crisis and conflict and doing battle against "those people" feel important and powerful and stirs up a lot of adrenaline. I am a hero from my point of view, and being a hero is what will make me feel good about myself. Hero produces hero-worship, doesn't it? I can live off that. Except I can't. Being a hero, whether in my own eyes or in your eyes, leads to a messy divorce between hero-me and real-me. I went through a divorce once and did not enjoy the experience. Took me a long time to get over it. I do not desire a life-long divorce process between hero-me and me.

Mercy. Mercy towards ourselves and towards others is what gives us a shot at having a warm and generous heart that is at peace inside and at peace with others.

What do you want from your life? Do you want to be warm and generous, or do you want to be right? The problem is, I love to be right, and occasionally I am. Being right is mood-altering and covers a multitude of sins. But being right is also so cold and so lonely. When I am right, there are all those people who are so wrong. They are not right at all. I'm not just talking about members of ISIS and the KKK, I'm talking about people in this very room and people in your own family. They're just wrong, because I am right.

Being right is cold and it's lonely. It puts such distance between people. Being right often depends on cold, legal arguments or religious principles, things which seldom contain oxygen. Still, to be honest, I can live with that. Or at least try to. I adjusted to living in oxygen-thin air a long time ago. I'm not so sure I want to give up being right. Do I want to have a warm, generous heart, or do I want to be right?

Can I get back with you on that?

Mercy says that God doesn't care that much about being your being right. God has such low standards. God reaches out and reaches out and reaches out to those of us who have very high standards and who need to be right and who show little mercy. Over and over again we are offered another chance to come in from the storm of battle against "those people," come down from the high altitude of rightness, and to stop drinking the toxic pollution of disdain.

Suppose we accepted the invitation of mercy. Suppose, in our desperation or in our weariness we decided to give mercy a try. How would we do that?

Mercy is not something you do—it's something you have inside you. You don't have to obtain it or achieve it, you already have it. You just have to learn to love it. Micah made it so simple: "...do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." Justice, treating all people fairly, is something to *do*; mercy is something to *love*.

You don't have to determine to be merciful, the way you determined to floss regularly. Nope. Try again. *Love* mercy. Love the mercy you receive. Somebody gives you a break, cuts you some slack, loves you anyway in spite of. Don't waste energy explaining that you didn't need mercy in the first place. Just receive it and love it. Mercy is going to come from someone we least expect, like the Samaritan in Jesus' story. From a man who drives a pick-up with NRA bumper stickers. From the guy with neck tattoos. From the girl with purple hair and a lip piercing or from a woman with blue hair who serves tea in a teacup. You never know where you're going to find mercy, but you can count on it being in the place you'd be least likely to look.

You get mercy by receiving it. That's the only way. That's the hard part—not by taking it but by receiving it. Not by deserving it or earning it, but by receiving it. I have invested so much in earning and deserving and winning and even taking if I have to; I am a novice beginner at simply receiving.

I saw it once on TV, though I don't remember the program. A mean, compulsive doctor was treating an autistic boy named Adam. The boy was suffering from migraines, as if autism wasn't enough. Adam's sole comfort was a handheld Game Boy. The Game Boy provided repetition, consistency, predictability, and thus safety. After the doctor relieved the boy of his headaches, as Adam was leaving the doctor's office, he handed his Game Boy to the doctor. Something in the boy's heart knew that the doctor was even more in pain and more isolated than he was. An autistic soul touching another autistic soul.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy," said Jesus. Practice mercy, receive mercy—which comes first. Where do I start?

Mercy can't be forced. If I force myself to give mercy to others, what I end up giving is pity. Pity means they need our goodness. Mercy means they *are* us. We're all just humans.

It isn't achieved by effort. It is mercy. And it comes when we are beaten down so badly that we become willing to receive. And that is so unlike us. We are so uncomfortable receiving mercy.

The name of God is mercy. Our name was mercy, too, until we changed our name to become more productive, more admired, less vulnerable. But mercy is still there. So listen to Micha: Do justice. Follow the rules, treat others fairly. But love mercy. Love the warmth within you, the flow of generosity. Love mercy—accept the acceptance, receive the forgiveness, whenever you can for as long as you can. Then pass it on. You, too, will bless and be blessed. Amen.

Pentecost—it's the third biggest day of the year for Christians. Christmas is Number One, of course. Then Easter. Then today: Pentecost. Christmas—Jesus' birthday; Easter—Jesus' resurrection; Pentecost—when a mighty wind blew through a house on a back street in Jerusalem and gave Jesus' disciples everything they needed to turn the world upside down. Not money, not corporate financing, not even ordained clergy. On the first Pentecost, Jesus' followers were given God's own breath, a.k.a. Holy Spirit.

You're ready, right? You have your Pentecost decorations up and your Pentecost shopping done; you have your Pentecost dinner planned and had already begun to wonder how long your relatives are going to stay for Pentecost. Because Pentecost is such a big deal—to almost nobody, unless you have to prepare a sermon or an anthem in church!

We have Christmas pageants and Easter parades; why aren't there Pentecost parties or Pentecost proms? Maybe it's because Pentecost is about the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is just a little bit spooky. Some of us are old enough to remember when the Holy Spirit was called the Holy *Ghost*, which wasn't exactly what you taught your children right before you put them to bed. And some of you have seen documentaries about those "spirit-filled" churches in north Georgia who handle rattlesnakes during the offertory. Uh, let's leave Pentecost to the Pentecostals!

Christmas is about when the sweet little baby Jesus came into the world for us; Good Friday is when Jesus died for us; Easter is when he conquered death for us. So Pentecost—what did God do for us on Pentecost? Well, that's a problem. Pentecost is not just about what God has done for us as it is about what God wants us to do in the world. Pentecost is the day when Jesus' followers received the good news that their bodies were about to take the place of his body in the world. Then God's Spirit came upon them that Pentecost day, specifically the *power* of Jesus' Spirit. That power gave them all they needed to carry on in Jesus' name.

Today is a celebration of when the followers of Jesus were changed from being the last of a dying breed into the first of generations and generations of Christians. Pentecost is a kind of birthday. It's a story of how something got started and how that start helped shape everything that has followed.

So it's interesting that there are actually two stories. Or two versions of the same story; you decide. One is told by Luke and the other by John. So if you sometimes get confused about why Christians don't all agree on what we should do or who we should be, this may be part of the reason.

In John's story, which happens on Easter evening, the eleven disciples are locked inside a house in Jerusalem. It may be the same house that they have slept in before without ever once worrying in the middle of the night whether somebody remembered to lock the windows and doors. But times have changed. Open windows are no longer ways in for cool breezes but for sinister people who are up to no good, and unlocked doors might as well have signs on them that say, "Looking for someone to rob and kill? Let us make it easy for you." After a while fear can become a kind of prison itself. You locked yourself in and no one else can let you out, since you are the only one who has the key.

In the case of the frightened disciples, Jesus got in without a key. Whatever he was made of by then, he did not need doors and windows anymore. He simply "came," John says, and stood among them. "Peace be with you," he said. (Hmm...been that way ever since, Jesus showing up in the most surprising places.) Then he showed them his ID—the wounds in his hands and his side—and peace was with them, as the word became flesh once again their sight.

Then he did something very creepy and mystical that none of them would ever forget. He breathed on them, opening his mouth and pouring what was inside of him into them so that their beards blew and their eyelashes fluttered and they could smell where he had come from—not just Golgotha and Galilee, but way before that—back when the world itself was being born. Anyone standing there that evening with any memory at all could smell Eden on his breath: salt brine, river mud, calla lilies. They could feel their own lungs fill as they breathed in what he breathed out.

What their fear had killed in them, his breath brought back to life. It was Genesis all over again, as they were created all over again by the power of what was coming out of his mouth. "Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus said, and that was how it happened. With a gentle breath, he conferred his spirit on his disciples, and life was never the same for them and for the entire world.

It's a lovely story, but it isn't the only story. Luke has another version. The disciples are still in a house, so he and John agree on that, although Luke's story takes place fifty days after Easter instead of the same day and there are about 120 people in the room instead of 11. The doors and windows aren't locked, either, because the people inside know they are waiting for something to come in from outside. According to

Luke, the last thing Jesus said to them was, "Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high," and while they don't have a clue what that might look like, they are waiting with all of the doors and windows open so that whatever it is can get in when it comes.

On the day of Pentecost, "it" turns out to be something even Luke has no words for. It starts with a sound like the rush of a violent wind, he says, and it fills the entire house where Jesus' followers are sitting. Then it bursts into tongues like flames above their heads, but when they open their mouths to shout, "Watch out! Your head's on fire!" that is not what comes out. It comes out instead, speaking languages that none of those Galileans ever learned, so that perfect strangers from the four corners of the world have to tell them it is God they are talking about—God and God's deeds of power—the latest of which is now featuring them, behaving so bizarrely under the power of God's spirit that the only paradigm some bystanders can come up with is drunk. "They are filled with cheap wine," some sneer, but Peter says no. "It's only nine o' clock in the morning," he protests. What did he mean by that? Check back again this afternoon?

Whatever he means, it conveys that God's Spirit is on the loose. God's Spirit is poured out on everybody, not just Peter, James and John, not just the twelve apostles, not just church people—everybody, young and old, male and female, philosophical Greek and camel-riding Turk. So hold on to your hats and hang on for the ride!

This is not a Gentle Breath story, but a Violent Wind story and it produces Violent Wind churches. The Spirit isn't a comforting puff but a wild sneeze, and it might blow the doors off. Violent Wind people ride that wind like an untamed stallion as they go out into their world in search of Holy fire. They may find that Spirit absolutely anywhere— that's how free God is—in a homeless shelter, at a local laundromat, in the beauty parlor of a nursing home, around a family supper table.

How do they know when they have found it? Because wherever the Spirit is, there is heat and light. Because people's lives are being changed around that fire and because they are so excited about what is happening to them that they sound positively sloshed—only it's not new wine they are drunk on but a new rush of God's spirit, but it's so hard to maintain one's dignity when breathing this snort of a Spirit Savior.

As different as John's and Luke's church birth stories are, they both tell about what happens when God's breath blows through a group of people. It starts with people who know what it's like to be locked up, short of breath, waiting for something, though they don't know exactly what.

And then when that something comes, whether it comes as gently as a sigh or so violently that it turns the furniture upside down, it turns out to be the very breath of life.

If we're lucky, most people get a dose of both comforting sigh and blow-you-away sneeze as part of living out their faith. Both ways are God's ways of showing that, though the Christmas decorations have been put away back in storage and the Easter Honeybaked Ham has long been devoured, though Jesus has come and risen and returned to heaven, God's best shot with us is not over. God continues to come to us and be with us and drive us into crazy-wild adventures. Like the disciples on Pentecost, we ain't seen nothin' yet!

This sermon was inspired by, perhaps borrowed from "God's Breath", by Barbara Brown Taylor, which appeared in *Journal for Preachers*, January, 2003.