



Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church
Connecting faith with everyday life

Sermon Archives

Date: June 25, 2017

Title: "Mercy Me, Part 2: Goodness and Mercy"

Scripture: Psalm 23, Luke 12:27-28

Description: The route to a good life, a warm and generous heart, is only via mercy.

What I am searching for is self-respect, a sense of confidence and self-acceptance, peace between my heart and me. I want a warm and generous heart that is at home inside Dave Fry. I've tried fervently to stalk it, capture it, and bring it home because it's out there. I know it is if I work hard enough for it.

So I worked hard for it. But it is so elusive. So we try harder, because that seems to be a better option than anything else. We try as hard as we can to make everyone happy, to please everyone, and to fill every moment with productivity. We learned from our parents. Our parents bit the bullet, stayed in bad marriages, kept jobs they hated. This is the American Way. This is being responsible, adult. But it doesn't produce self-respect, a sense of confidence and self-acceptance, peace, a warm and generous heart.

The only way out of jail is mercy. The only way to become free is through mercy. Mercy is what makes you a good person, the person you want to be. Goodness and mercy, they go together like cream and sugar.

I began early to work hard on my life. My best event was the 880 yard run, the half-mile. And I was good at it, qualifying for the state meet my junior year. I was going for a medal, perhaps the state championship. "First call for the 880 yard dash," announced the P.A., fifteen minutes before my event. Wait, wait—my event was the 880 yard *run*; why is he announcing the 880 yard *dash*? I don't do *dash*!" Turns out, the other nine competitors did. And I finished last.

I thought life would be, "Oh, you can run swiftly. We'll adore you forever!" or "Oh, you have such a beautiful voice. Here, have a starring role and make good money." But everybody else in the program had a beautiful voice too, or could run like the wind, or cook. I was not a special star; I was ordinary, average. No matter how well we do, we can always find others who are doing better. So we try harder, because that seems to be a better option than not trying. What else are you going to do, quit?

Unlike impressive biceps or the ability to play the piano, we don't achieve goodness by working on it. The harder we work on improving ourselves, the less we improve ourselves. I know, you can improve your Sumo wrestling skills with practice, you can improve your Spanish vocabulary by studying. But you cannot improve your self with effort.

We acquire a life by accepting mercy. I met my first true love when we were in middle school. I so wanted her to "like me." ("Love" was not a term we used.) So I tried so hard to impress her. This accomplished one thing only: she remembered my name. "That Fry boy is really weird!" "Just be yourself," coached my mother, but what do parents know. Goodness and greatness are not friends. Goodness and mercy are joined at the hip. [two become one.]

There appear to be two ways to mercy. The first is to get cancer. Most of the people I've known who have received a terminal diagnosis have gotten serious about joy, forgiveness, simple pleasures—a dogwood in bloom, a massage, strawberries, the summer's first peaches. They have made peace with people who did unforgivable damage to them. They know they are going to die one of these days, but maybe not today, so they live, savor, rest, and wake up kind of amazed. The thing is, I'd like to acquire these qualities without the stage four diagnosis.

There's an alternate way. We achieve goodness by accepting mercy. Hope and renewal and restoration are found in one place: mercy. Goodness and mercy go together like cream and sugar. Would you please give up trying so hard to be good? Instead, receive mercy.

Your effort to improve yourself can change your behavior, it cannot change you. Effort can put food into your mouth, it cannot produce an appetite; it can keep you in bed, it cannot produce sleep; it can make you say your prayers, it cannot produce trust in God. All you can achieve by your effort is discipline, not genuine change. Genuine change comes through mercy. As the Psalm says, "It is God that hath made us, not we ourselves."

A warm and generous heart is not something you can produce by trying to become warm and generous. If you need to try something, look at the opposite of warm and generous. Pay close attention to being cold and stingy. How does it feel when you're that way? What results in your life do those traits bring? Pay close attention to them, and they lose their attraction. Don't try to change those things, just accept that they're part of you and that you need mercy. Behold, cold and stingy begin to wither and die. Leave the change—the way you change, the speed, the time—leave those to God, whose name is mercy. Mysteriously, your heart will grow warm and generous.

Afterwards, you won't go around thinking, "I am sooo warm and generous." Because you didn't accomplish a thing. You were simply granted mercy.

Mercy begets humility. When you meet someone who is cold and stingy, you can secretly say, "I used to be cold and stingy, but I'm better than that now. They need to get with the program." Instead you'll say, "I, too, have the capacity to be that way, and I know how much it hurts inside. I also know that the only thing that sets a person free is forgiveness." Mercy. You're not better than those people who do that stuff. You *are* one of those people. Except you were forgiven.

Mercy softens us ever so slightly, so that we don't have to condemn others for being total jerks. You may be warm and generous, loving and caring, but at times you have been a total jerk. I'll tell you a secret; can you handle it? Sometimes you still are a total jerk. Because you're a mixture of good and bad. All of us are. Everyone is.

Life itself has always been a mixed grill: lovely, hard, exhilarating, painful, and most often a hot mess hodgepodge. I would have created life to run like Microsoft Word, with separate folders for joy, sorrow, ease, boredom, insanity. But no, we got transferred from the Garden of Eden into a place of danger and terror, and a place also of love and beauty and gentleness and kindness. The world is a chaotic place. Bad stuff happens. Comfort zones leak. A niece dies, a lesion appears, affairs happen. If someone is so good at life that they've been spared, you can bet they are next in the line of fire. You want a predictable, safe ride? Climb on the pony on the merry-go-round, but in real life.... The world is a mixture; you are a mixture.

So stop trying to straighten out the world. Stop trying to clean up the mess. Stop trying to be good and to make everyone else behave. No matter how much you concentrate on playing the ceaseless video game of life, how meticulously you reply to every single email that has gone unanswered, how attentively you want to protect your children, you're not going to eliminate all the bad things from life or from yourself. Please, stop trying.

Consider the lilies of the field. A seed doesn't despise itself for being a seed, covered in soil and wallowing in dirt. It doesn't look down at other seeds and say, "You can be better than that." And a flower doesn't look around the field and say, "Those other flowers have beautiful blooms and blossoms. I'm all roots and stem; I need to shape up!" No, it receives the rain and the warmth of the sun, without the slightest urge to be anything other than what it is. Then it blooms. Mercy becomes goodness, as sure as a seedling becomes an orchid.

But if you give up trying, wouldn't you lapse into being a total mess? My air-traffic-controller mind screams that if I don't pay vigilant attention, the world will come crashing into chaos. The sky will fall!

There's another way. It is the way of mercy. Without needing to become something else, you receive mercy and forgiveness. Without judgment or condemnation or obligation to shape up—mercy. Then you will notice a beautiful

thing happening within you. You become flooded with warmth and generosity, with a loving and caring heart. Goodness and mercy.

We realize that underneath everything, we are held. No matter how much we deserve to be tossed aside, we are held. We are children in a loving parent's arms. We receive mercy. Underneath all things is something that can't be destroyed. When all is lost, something is there. Something we need.

When we stop trying to fix ourselves, we can stop trying to fix others too. When we receive mercy, we're free to give mercy. We stop doing for others and start just listening to them. We might hear about hell, the hell of a custody battle, a betrayal, the loss of a pet. And we didn't have to fix it or create silver linings. We look into other people's eyes. We connect, and walk across the bridge that appears between us. Sometimes we feel useless because we haven't done anything. Then we realize we were doing all we could, as well as we could. We were being a friend. A merciful friend.

A soul reaches out and touches another soul, like deep calling to deep. There's a sentence in a Psalm that says, "Deep calls to deep, in the roar of your waterfalls." It's talking about floods of trouble and sorrow, but there is an opposite and equal truth. There was a deep part of us, the very deepest part of us, that can has the capacity to touch the deep part of another.

This startles you when you suddenly receive it. It also surprises you when you suddenly give it. It's part of the human part of who you are. Goodness and mercy begin with this.

Goodness and mercy go together like cream and sugar.