

Mercy Triumphs Over Judgment

James 2:1-17

September 9, 2018 – Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Last week, we began a series on the Epistle of James, a wonderful book on Christian living. Today we read of loving our neighbors, caring for the poor and needy, and being non-judgmental. As I read today's scripture passage, four people came to mind. Four people that exemplified ministry to the poor.

The first was Mother Teresa, now known as Saint Teresa of Calcutta. You may know Saint Teresa's story. She was born in 1910 to an Albanian family. By the age of twelve she was convinced that she should commit herself to a religious life. At the age of 18 she left home to join the Sister of Loreto, and she traveled to the Loreto Abbey in Ireland to learn English. She arrived in India in 1929. She soon found herself teaching at a convent school in Calcutta; but she was increasingly disturbed by the poverty surrounding her. On September 10, 1946, Teresa experienced what she later described as "the call within the call" while riding the train to the convent in Darjeeling. She stated, "I was to leave the convent and help the poor while living among them. She began missionary work in 1948 providing medical help to the hungry and the "poorest among the poor." In 1950 she founded the Missionaries of Charity. In 1953, she opened a hospice house for the poor and especially for those with leprosy – providing medication, dressings and food. In 1955, she opened an orphanage; and the ministry grew from a few helpers of over 5000 people world-wide.

I never met Saint Teresa, but I know two people who have. The first is a chaplain friend of mine; who was introduced to her while touring India. She told me, "Our meeting was short; but, as I was leaving, Mother Teresa looked me in the eye and said, 'When are you coming to stay?'" My friend told me, "Leaving was very difficult, and that call to return has always echoed in my heart."

The other person who met Mother Teresa was a Benedictine Monk that I was privileged to have as a fellow student in a graduate theology class. He had been doing some research in the Vatican library at the same time that Mother Teresa had happened to be there. One morning at breakfast, my friend looked at her and said, "Mother Teresa, you look tired. Did you not sleep well?" Mother Teresa responded, "It was a short night, I only slept about four hours." "Four hours?" my friend exclaimed, "What time did you get to bed?" She replied, "About midnight." "About midnight? What were you doing until midnight?" Teresa responded, "Why I was out on the streets ministering to the poor. You know, there are a lot of poor and homeless in Rome, I was out on the street with the poor." "Well, what time did you rise this morning?" "About 4:00 a.m." she responded. "4 a.m., why did you get up at 4 a.m.?" "To pray," Teresa said, "I

always rise at 4:00 to pray before I start my day.” Mother Teresa was canonized on September 4, 2016, thus becoming Saint Teresa of Calcutta; and few people though history have so exemplified love of the poor, non-judgmental care, and a total outpouring of mercy as Saint Teresa.

The second person on my list of lovers of the poor is John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement in the eighteenth century. Wesley lived in England at a time when the aristocracy (about 1% of the population) lived very well; and most of the rest of the population lived very poorly. And so, Wesley, as a rather well-off Anglican priest, felt the call to take the gospel to the people. Wesley started preaching in open fields and at the work places of the common people. Wesley convinced his followers that there was a better way to live than to drown their sorrows in gin. Wesley was a preacher, but he was also a social worker. He lived the Epistle of James, where it says “Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough to eat. What if one of you said, ‘Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal’? What good is it if you don’t actually give them what their body needs?”(James 2:15-16) So in addition to his preaching, Wesley opened hospitals, and orphanages, and schools, and homes for the aged, (a practice that has remained a part of Methodism to this day). Wesley took food to prisoners, who otherwise would have starved. When Wesley was not preaching, he would spend his time on the streets begging for money for the poor; and it’s estimated that, over the course of his ministry, he gained over 250,000 pounds by begging. He also said, “If I should die with more than ten pounds in my pocket, I should be considered a thief.” Wesley died with six pounds in his pocket. His brother, Charles, hired six homeless men to be his pallbearers and paid them one pound a piece.

The third person on my list of the merciful is Saint Francis of Assisi. I have studied the life and writing of Francis in detail. Our Methodist tradition does not support the taking of a patron saint; but, I have always said, “If I were to take a patron saint it would be Francis.” Francis exemplified a Christian life like few individuals since Jesus Christ. Born to a well-to-do upper middle class family, he walked away from a comfortable life, to take on the robe of a poor friar, to minister to the poor and the lepers, to commune with nature, and to share God’s love with the least, the lost, and the lonely. It’s all about mercy.

And then, of course, there is Jesus, himself. It’s Jesus who said, “Judge not, that ye be not judged.”(Matthew 7:1) And, of course, it was Jesus who said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”(Luke 10:27) When preaching on the temptations of Jesus, I have often said that the greatest temptation of Jesus was to return to life in the carpenter’s shop and ignore the call to take on the role of Son of God. But Jesus gave up life as a carpenter to become an itinerant preacher, a teacher, and a healer. Still, so much more than that, Jesus suffered death on a cross, for you and

for me, indeed for all people – death without judgment. Indeed, Jesus is the ultimate expression of God’s love and the ultimate expression of mercy triumphant over judgment. Indeed, Jesus was the model for Saint Francis, for John Wesley, and for Saint Teresa.

And now, the question: Is Jesus the model for you and for me? Do Francis and John Wesley and Teresa provide a model for you and for me? This church’s newsletter is titled “Agape,” but the subtitle is “Greek for ‘Love without Limits.’” I really like that. “Love without Limits,” love that is not limited by the way a person looks or acts or smells, love that is not limited by what someone is wearing.

Now, as I’ve said before, it’s not always easy being a Christian. It’s not always easy to accept those who are poor, those who are different from ourselves. Often I have said, “That’s part of the beauty of our Youth Mission Trips.” Our youth get to experience and to share with people who are less fortunate than themselves – in some cases, people who are really poor. On mission trips we truly learn to share God’s love with all people – and that’s huge. But I also recognize that, when the week is over, we will all come home to our comfortable homes – generally without worry of food on our tables or clothes on our backs.

I’ve told the story before of having been in a seminar with a group of professors – studying the Gospel of Mark. We came to the parable of the Rich Man – Jesus said that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. (Mark 10:25) To that, an English professor said, “Well professors don’t need to worry about that. We’ll never be rich.” The seminar leader responded, “Compared to our immediate neighbors, that may be true; but compared to the average person in this world, we are all very rich.” I have never forgotten that; and I will always struggle with that.

How do I follow the example of Teresa, Wesley, and Francis? More importantly, how do I follow the example of Jesus Christ? How do you follow the example of Jesus? James states: “Faith without works is dead.” Martin Luther had a problem with that. He stated that one receives salvation only through faith in Christ. But John Wesley noted, and I think properly, that one receives salvation only through faith; but, if one’s faith is genuine, one will do the good works.

And so, I invite you to struggle with me over the parable of the rich man. I hope all of us are continually asking ourselves, “Can we do more? Should we be doing more?” However, I also hope the struggle does not lead to suffering. Indeed, there is joy in the giving. There is joy in the doing. But most of all there is joy in knowing that we have a loving and a merciful God. Just as we are called to be merciful to those in need; we have faith that God is merciful with us. And James reminds us that “Mercy triumphs over judgment.”

Let us pray. . .

Most merciful and loving God,
Lead us and guide us,
that, as we experience your mercy,
we offer mercy to others, the poor, the needy,
those who need food for their bodies,
and those who need food for their souls.
Lead us and guide us to care and share,
to offer love without limits to all people.
This we pray in your holy name.
Amen.

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