

1 Sermon, September 11, 2011

Texts: Psalm 123:1-4, Matthew 9:9-13, James 2:8-13

Title: "Finding Christ at the Center: Mercy"

1. Ten years ago, a plea for mercy
2. Mercy concept
3. Then a reliance on stuff that might protect us.
4. Now a realization of our vulnerability and the only one who can bless us in the vulnerability
5. What is the good news? A more radical trust
6. Stories

1. Ten years ago, a plea for mercy

You probably remember where you were ten years ago today, about this time, when you heard the news about the twin towers.

And you may remember the collective, if unspoken, prayer that went up from many hearts as we listened to the radio or watched TV. It was a prayer for mercy.

At the time, you might not have called it a prayer for mercy, but that's what it was. It was a prayer that God might have pity and favor on those caught up in the tragedy.

2. Mercy concept

Mercy is not a word we use a lot today. But it is a very Biblical concept, and one we could use some more of today.

The word for mercy in Hebrew comes from the root "womb," so it is connected to the feeling you have for the mother who gave birth to you, and those who were also born of your mother. So mercy is about relationship.

The word "mercy" in the New Testament (in Greek) talks about a tightening or turning in your gut. The people of ancient Palestine saw the gut as the place for affection, benevolence and pity. In other words, mercy has to do with a deep feeling for someone.

But "mercy" in the whole of the Bible refers not just to a feeling, but an action. Someone, moved by a feeling, does something to help.

2 Sermon, September 11, 2011

Finally, mercy is something that can only be given by someone in a position of power to someone who has less power. Mercy is a gift; the receiver of mercy can seldom earn it. We like to think we are equal; we don't want to admit that there is one who is more powerful.

So, ten years ago, the unspoken prayer for mercy that rose up around the world was a prayer to God whom we have a relationship with, asking for God's compassion and action. The action could have been for protection or restoration or even forgiveness.

And the prayer ten years ago admitted that God was much greater than us, and had the power to make a difference.

Maybe you hear an echo of that prayer in today's Psalm, which is a fervent prayer for God's help:

Our LORD and our God, I turn my eyes to you,
on your throne in heaven.
Servants look to their master, but we will look to you,
until you have mercy on us.
Please have mercy, LORD!
We have been insulted more than we can stand,
and we can't take more abuse
from those proud, conceited people.

You can hear desperation in the Psalm, but can you also hear the trust? The Psalm writer could not have written that Psalm without trusting in God's power to make things better. The Psalm writer looks up to God in anticipation that God will do something. The whole community joins in the Psalm, proclaiming God's greatness, and asking for mercy.

Those who prayed that Psalm in ancient Israel treated it not as an act of resignation, of giving up – no, they were actively looking for God's mercy. The faithful understand that life is not something they have earned or made, but it is a gift from the creator, sustainer, and king enthroned in the heavens.

3. Then a reliance on stuff that might protect us.

But it seems that, not too long after September 11, 2011, the attention turned, not to God, but to things we ourselves could do to try to stave off future attacks: new airline regulations, beefed up border security, increased scrutiny of Muslims in the US, etc.

3 Sermon, September 11, 2011

We also had yellow, orange and red alerts, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Now, I'm not listing these things as criticism; increased safeguards were a very good thing, and protected many innocent people.

My point is that the God-emphasis was lost shortly after September 11, 2001.

Somewhere along the way we stopped asking for mercy and relied once again on our own strength.

4. Now a realization of our vulnerability and the only one who can bless us in the vulnerability

I got a letter from our Bishop, Linda Lee this week. She wrote of the tenth anniversary the the September 11 attacks. She said:

Reports of new threats of violence from beyond our nation's borders open again the unhealed wounds of previous losses. The tragedy is catastrophic, not only because of the lives lost, but because our daily living has been lost to fear, hatred and... violence.

Bishop Lee captured the sense of uneasiness we may feel in the face of this anniversary.

But with this uneasiness may come a renewed understanding of our need for mercy.

You see, we still need mercy. Just as Jesus said in the reading from Matthew:

People who are well do not need a doctor, but only those who are sick.

We need mercy because we're sick, and need a physician. We need mercy because we don't have the answers, because we are afraid of things beyond our understanding, because we are vulnerable. We need mercy because God wants *us* to be merciful, and we must experience mercy in order to show mercy.

When Jesus was criticized for having the wrong kind of friends, like tax collectors and cheats – he responded by saying:

Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'

4 Sermon, September 11, 2011

Jesus held up a distinction between mercy and sacrifice.

Sacrifice, back then, was obeying all the ritual law, buying an unblemished animal and having it sacrificed in the Jerusalem temple. Sacrifice was doing all the right things, following all the rules.

Mercy, on the other hand, was having a relationship with someone, and feeling for that person who is going through a tough time. Mercy is acted out knowing that one person has more power than the other. The more powerful person has mercy by providing for less fortunate one with something they need.

When Jesus talks about wanting mercy, rather than sacrifice, it is about risking relationship, about caring, about doing things outside the box for someone.

Jesus wants a sort of kindness that sets us off balance, that is extravagant, that is beyond our power to supply; but not beyond God's power to supply.

And when we open up our hearts in caring, then God can give us even more love to share.

As Jesus said, blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

5. What is the good news? A more radical trust

So what's the good news?

Because of God's mercy, we have enough. We have enough to share.

Because of God's mercy, evil cannot defeat us.

Because of God's mercy, we do not have to earn acceptance. We are accepted.

We can, by taking the lesson of 9/11 to heart, develop a more radical trust in Christ.

It is that radical kind of trust that the disciples showed when Jesus sent them out to

"Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep Matthew 10:8-10, NIV.

5 Sermon, September 11, 2011

Now that is a radical trust. It's a radical trust knowing that we cannot control everything, that we will be rejected, but also trusting that there will be great blessings in store.

At the center of our faith is trust based on mercy.

6. Stories – our mercy toward others

I want to tell a true story:

On 9/11 when the towers were falling in New York City, an Islamic Arab from Palestine was running for his life in the surging crowd when he stumbled and fell. Paralyzed with fear and unable to get up, he was trampled within seconds by hundreds of feet rushing past him. Then the man felt an arm on his shoulder and a voice speaking to him. "Get up, brother! We have to get out of here." Unable to stand because of his injuries, he felt himself being picked up. Again he heard the voice: "Brother, we have to get out of here." Half dragged, half carried down many stories, the man finally emerged from the building leaning heavily on his rescuer. As the injured Palestinian turned to thank the person who had carried him to safety, his eyes widened, for the person who had called him "brother," the man who had saved his life, was a Hasidic Jew.

(TILDA NORBERG, *Ashes Transformed: Healing from Trauma*, Upper Room Books, 2002, pp. 54-55)

That's a story of mercy. That's a story of trust.
That's the kind of mercy God has for us.

Amen.

Psalm 46 [NSRV]

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, though its
waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its
tumult. *Selah*

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the
holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city; it
shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. The
nations are in an uproar; the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice;

6 Sermon, September 11, 2011

the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*

Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.' Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations; I am exalted in the earth.' The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*