

“Have Mercy, Jesus!”

Mark 10: 46-52

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In the fine tradition of loving, caring siblings, when my two brothers and I were together as children, our main objective was to inflict as much pain on each other as possible. Our antics led to tears, bruises, broken furniture, the occasional ER trip, and a lot of headaches for our parents. At my grandparents house last month I got to go through family photos and found an old favorite that really exemplified this dynamic—I was about 3 years old, in a swimming pool, held afloat by what appeared to be a floating highchair—something that has probably now been banned for safety reasons. I'm smiling brightly at the camera, while right behind me, my older brother Brian is concentrating fiercely and using all his might to shove my head under water. Ahhh, there's nothing like the protection and love of an older brother.

Our favorite way to torture each other was through the game Mercy. Have you played this? It's a simple game, but not one that I can endorse. You walk up to someone and pinch them until they cry “mercy.” That's the whole game. We would play this daily, whenever we found a quiet moment or whenever our parents had their attention turned elsewhere. It got to the point where if I gave a certain look, my brother knew to cry out “mercy!” before I could reach him—and vice versa.

Although the way I learned the power of the word “mercy” is the stuff destined for family therapy, that word has come to have great meaning for me. To this day, in my opinion, it remains the only word strong enough and passionate enough to belt out when you are at the end of your rope and can't take the pain any more. “Mercy” is the word to invoke when all other hope has disappeared.

It's a word that I believe should be invoked more often in our lives. I feel like when people are in pain or need help, we are often hesitant to say so. We are afraid—of being vulnerable, of appearing

weak, of exposing that weakness lest no one is able or willing to help us, lest no one is willing to show compassion for our circumstances and our struggles. But when we do not cry out—if we keep it bottled up inside of us—there is no way to get the help or the merely the relief from sharing our situation. It is only in admitting how much pain we have—in literally crying out for mercy—that we can receive the assistance or the listening ear we need in order for hope to return to us once more.

Bartimeous, the blind beggar in our gospel story today, understood the power of crying for mercy, and he invoked that power when he encountered Jesus. Bartimeous would have been a fixture in the streets of Jericho. He would have had his own corner, a spot that people knew to avoid, lest they be faced too closely with someone else's suffering. I can imagine people crossing the street to avoid hearing his request for a bit of money or a bit of food—avoid having to say no to him or having to give up a part of their daily wages or the lunch in their bag. I imagine Bartimeous had a lonely life, used to speaking out and having no response, used to asking for help and receiving none. So maybe that is why when he hears that Jesus is coming through town, that Jesus in fact walking down the same street Bartimeous begs on each day, maybe that is why he realizes he has already lost everything, and it was time to cry out.

Bartimeous does not approach Jesus and ask him politely for a favor. He does not wait in a line or ask one of the disciples to deliver a message for him. He has no friends to lower him through a roof down to Jesus or to lead him to his side. All he has left is his voice, and so he lets it ring out through the crowds. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me! Have compassion. Restore my sight. Restore me to wholeness.”

And Jesus does. Because that is who Jesus is. His ministry is a ministry of mercy. Jesus did not ask Bartimeous for his name or his credentials. He did not ask Bartimeous where he worshipped or what side of town he lived on. The only thing he asks of him is, “What do you want me to do for you? How can I show you mercy?” And when Bartimeous asks him to give him sight, to restore his vision, Jesus does. No explanations, no tests, no thank yous necessary. When Bartimeous asks for mercy, Jesus

gives fully and completely, without hesitation.

This is the Good News for each one of us. All we have to do is ask for mercy, and Jesus will respond to our cries. Our God is not a God who withholds mercy or forgiveness or love from any person. Our God is a God who freely offers mercy and forgiveness and love for anyone who asks. For each of us who cries out for mercy, who asks for help, God will be there. That's all it takes. When you cry out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus responds, "Go; your faith has made you well."

Admitting that we need God's mercy is not something that is easy for us to do. Today I believe that we express the need and desire to receive this gift in different ways. Although it may come out through our cries, it also appears in other forms—two forms in the particular.

The first way I think our need and desire for mercy comes out is through the gifts we offer to the church. We give to the church because we know how many people in our community are in pain, and our gifts are our prayers for everyone who suffers—given with the hope that they will bring relief and healing. We give to the church because we believe that our gifts united can make a larger impact than we can as individuals. We are acutely aware of people and places that need our help, and we know we can't solve these problems on our own. So we pray to God, we give an offering, we make a pledge—with the hope that it will be the answer to someone's prayer.

Today is Gratitude Sunday, the day we celebrate all the pledges of financial commitments that individuals and families make for the coming year. Not every faith tradition pledges—for some people it is only something we hear about on NPR—but this one does. And I believe that one of the main reasons we do so is our recognition that we need God and God's mercy to be at work in our community. We dedicate our offering and our pledges, with the hope that South Church will be a place of sanctuary and refuge for all who enter.

The other form our prayers for mercy take is through our songs. When we sing, we often speak the words we wouldn't otherwise dare utter. We lift up prayers and hopes through music because the harmonies make us brave and the unison voices give us strength to ask for mercy and to thank God

when we receive it.

We don't have to look any further than “Amazing Grace” to understand this. It is the one hymn that we all know. Even if this is your very first time at South Church or even your very first time in any church—I can guarantee that you know the melody to “Amazing Grace.” It's a part of the very fabric of our country. We don't always cry out, “Have mercy on me, Jesus!” but we know the words, “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.” The words are our prayer that we will over and over again throughout our lives be saved by grace and mercy, that we will be found by God's love, and that we will have many moments where we move from blindness to sight.

“Mercy” is meant to be sung about, it is meant to be cried out loud for all to hear—it is not a word that invites a whisper or a whimper. “Mercy” is not for the strong. It is not for those people who have it all figured out. It is for those of us who have, at some point in our life, felt like that blind beggar, who have felt left out, felt desperate for relief from our pain. It is for anyone who has prayed to Jesus and said, “Let me see again. Restore me to wholeness.” And so, I am thankful for mercy. Thankful for that word which evokes so much meaning and feeling. Thankful for the vocabulary to describe the brokenness which we have all felt at some point, and thankful, so very thankful, for the God who responds to our cries of mercy with love, with compassion, and with a healing touch.