

Come closer to me

When those who hold power over others show compassion or forgiveness, there's a word for that. When someone *could* choose to punish, or inflict harm, but instead chooses to restore the relationship, there's a word for that. When someone takes a risk, becomes a little more vulnerable, and even lays some of their power down in order to bring about healing, there's a word for that.

That word is mercy. Last week violent passions were on full display, and yet to speak of mercy we must move in a different direction. To be merciful, we must be guided by love, rather than by something baser, like hatred, or bigotry, or even basic self-preservation. (Humans have done some of their most damaging work in the name of self-preservation). In our worst moments, we can easily fall for the fantasy that God is as angry and unforgiving and tribal and power-mad as we are.

Yet mercy is medicine for every one of these, and the Kingdom of God is built upon it. It is the very nature of God to show mercy, to show compassion and forgiveness, to restore broken relationships. To be on the journey into the heart of God, to become more holy and to become a beacon of God's love in a world experiencing pain, is to let our lives be shaped and led by mercy. Mercy is at the root of integrity, and strength, and maturity. Mercy – practicing compassion and even forgiveness when we might otherwise be tempted to harm or punish or cast away – is at the heart of coming to see all things as God sees them.

In the big picture, the readings from scripture today are all about a kind of movement towards union, towards oneness with God, towards oneness as a beloved community. We must hold on to that, especially when so much of what we see and feel today is the exact opposite, a splintering, a dividing. We are created for this very movement towards God, as if God says to us in a moment of great tenderness and intimacy: *come closer to me*.

Oh, how good and pleasant it is, writes the psalmist, when brethren live together in unity. It is like fine oil upon the head, that runs down upon the beard, upon the beard of Aaron, and runs down the upon the collar of his

robe. Isn't that beautiful? It's an ancient image of communion, of living in a state of union with brothers and sisters, gathered around the warming fire of God's mercy.

Yet we know that such union is hard to come by, and I think that's because we are addicted to power and we largely leave these power imbalances unaddressed. The body of Christ – the community of followers of Jesus – is a place of radical equality where we each behold the other as a child of God, as a sinner, as a fearfully and wonderfully made creation of the Holy One. But that is not where the world is, and we are often not there, and so we need something that can disrupt and dismantle our unholy divisiveness. What we need is *mercy*.

The story of Joseph shows what mercy really is. Last week we read the account of the crime that started this story: Joseph had his father's favor, so his brothers – each a patriarch of the tribes of Israel – said "Come, let us kill this dreamer." They showed him no mercy – except that they stopped shy of killing him, they simply cast him away, leaving him in a pit to die. But he didn't die...he was rescued, and rose in favor and power under the pharaoh, and in the time of famine became the savior of Egypt.

When the brothers came looking for food, Joseph *could* have acted punitively. He didn't even have to be a bad guy...he could be passive, look the other way, and let his brothers take their chances. Yet when we are centered on love, rooted in God, mercy is the path we naturally follow. Joseph was driven not by malice or anger or envy but by love. He wanted to know if his father was still living. He wanted his brothers to be fed. Joseph showed *mercy*. They didn't recognize him at first, so he said to them *Come closer to me*. Come closer to me. And they knew.

Come closer to me. Because healing and restoration happen when we can see and touch one another. Come closer to me: because mercy means making ourselves vulnerable, but it also makes intimacy and love possibility. Come closer to me: because this very movement is what God asks of us.

But curiously.... today's Gospel also enacts this pattern of coming closer to God, though this may be the only time where it happens not *because* of

what Jesus says, but *despite it*. As Jesus is ministering in Tyre and Sidon he's approached by a Canaanite woman with an afflicted daughter. *She* says to Jesus, *Lord, come closer to ME. Have mercy on me*, she says, for she believes that he has can heal her daughter.

Jesus' answer is...perplexing...but it gives us insight into who this woman is in the pecking order of power. Though the Romans had the most power, the Hebrews clearly had some, while gentile groups like the Canaanites (remember, they'd been defeated centuries ago by the descendants of Joseph and his brothers) were even lower on the food chain. Jesus' first response is decidedly *un-merciful*. "Send her away" (rather than Come closer to me) because in that moment his Good News was for the Hebrews alone. His was still an Israelite-centric universe.

Sadly, there are some who read "It is not fair to give the bread of life to the dogs" who would stop paying attention after that. But the Canaanite woman did not stop there. Undeterred, as only a parent of a suffering child would be, she essentially said, Yet we all hunger for this bread. And it is our hunger for love, our hunger for union, our hunger for mercy, that brings us back to God. Is God tribal? Or is God merciful? From beyond the invisible boundaries, she cried out, *Lord, come closer to me*.

She was separated from Jesus by every wall you could imagine, every social and national boundary that was in play at the time. This was an audacious and beautiful transgression, and it appears to have transformed the heart of Jesus. This leads me to ask: *Have you transgressed anything lately that was really asking for it? Have you transgressed anything audaciously and beautifully? Have you done so with love and mercy, with eye towards dismantling the architecture of sin and instead bringing about a more loving world?*

Pema Chodran writes that "to train in dissolving the barriers that we erect between ourselves and the world is the best use of our human lives." I would say yes to that, but I would go a bit farther and say that the best use of our lives is to respond when God says, *Come closer to me*.

Come closer. Put down your burdens. Put down your weapons. Put aside the power and anger that's eating away at your own dignity, and let me embrace you.

Just as Joseph shows mercy to his brothers – who had done something very wrong...just as Jesus shows mercy to the Canaanite woman (who had done nothing wrong) – God looks to us with compassion and mercy, desiring nothing more than our return. We respond when we show mercy to others. We honor that embrace when we see the folly in lording over another human being. We return to God when we see that our tribalism is all about us, not God, and that God hungers for a relationship anchored in something far more enduring.

For mercy is not just about compassion and forgiveness. Mercy is at the very heart of restoration.

Homily for August 20, The Rev. Bernard J. Owens, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Greensboro, North Carolina, the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 15.