

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, February 20, 2011
Rev. John Tapscott

"WHO ARE THE BLESSED? Part 3"

Matthew 5:7,8

We continue our series on Jesus' beatitudes from his Sermon on the Mount. Today we begin with this one, "**Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.**" Jesus says that those who show mercy are fortunate spiritually because they will receive mercy from others and from God himself.

In John 8 we read that some men brought to Jesus a woman caught in adultery, saying to him, "The law of Moses says that we should stone such sinners. What do you say?" They were trying to trap Jesus. If he said, "No, don't stone her," they would accuse him of breaking God's law. But if he said, "Yes, stone her," they would tell the Roman authorities, "Your law says that only you can carry out capitol punishment. But he's telling us Jews to do it. Arrest this trouble-maker." But Jesus didn't take the bait. He reached down, wrote in the sand, then said, "Whoever among you is without sin, you cast the first stone." They went away, one by one, beginning with the elders. Jesus was left alone with the woman. He rose up, saying, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir!" Jesus said "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and do not sin again."

Ironically Jesus was the only one there without sin. He could have condemned the woman and carried out the sentence, but refused to do so. Jesus certainly took the sin seriously, but showed mercy. This unforgettable story provides background for the beatitude, "Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy."

Now don't misunderstand. Jesus is not saying that we earn God's mercy by showing mercy to others. Actually we show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us. In the story, Jesus' words made each man realize that mercy had been shown to them and that they ought to be merciful themselves. It's the same with forgiveness. The Cross means that we are forgiven by what God has done, not by what we do. So, as Paul tells us, we forgive others as we have been forgiven. It's the same with the quality called mercy, which includes forgiveness, but is even broader. God's mercy comes to us first because we need it, and because we can't earn it. Jesus showed mercy towards the woman because she needed it, not because she had earned it or even asked for it. God

showed mercy to Israel before they did anything to earn his mercy. David wrote in the 23rd Psalm, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." But not because David had earned it. God's goodness and mercy followed him because God himself is good and merciful. God's mercy always came first for Israel. And it comes first for us, too.

Now you would think that Jesus, the merciful one, would have been received mercy from others. But he didn't. The light he shone in our darkness was just too bright and the truth he spoke from God was just too truthful. The one without sin was treated shamefully. No mercy was shown to him. Stones became nails which held him in death on the Cross. But in that death he took our place and bore our condemnation. Then on the third day the Father raised him from the dead to live forevermore, vindicating all he said and did, and declaring to the world that Jesus is indeed Lord of all. And from the Cross of Christ flows a never-ending stream of divine mercy for you and for me and for the whole world. And that mercy is our hope.

A woman went to have her photo taken and said to the photographer, "Try to do me justice." And the photographer, rashly perhaps, but truthfully, said, "Madam, what you need is not justice, but mercy." We all need mercy. All our relationships, our marriages, our friendships and our relationship with God require mercy. If we need clean hands to come before God, to pray, to enter his house, to receive the sacrament, how could we do it? Well, we couldn't. But we do all this because our Holy God loves us and treats us with mercy. So we treat others mercifully because he has been merciful to us.

You know, even the justice system has a degree of mercy built into it. Yes, I know that the justice system is sometimes accused of coddling criminals. Perhaps so, but there has to be a degree of mercy, for mercy can change a person's life. And it takes a good deal of wisdom to balance justice and mercy.

When I had a car accident a few years ago, I was grateful that the charge against me was downgraded when I got to court. Of course, I still had to pay a fine, but a much lesser one. Perhaps mercy was shown to me and others that day because those in charge of justice know how easy it is to lock up your brakes on a snowy road and slide into another car. In any case, mercy was shown.

Notice in the story how it was the older men who dropped the stones and walked away first. That's not surprising. For as you get older you realize how often you've needed mercy and how often it's been shown to you. Experience doesn't make you soft on sin but can make you more merciful toward others.

Experience helps you to understand another's situation, which is a core meaning of mercy. A great theologian tells us that forgiving love is a possibility only for those who feel themselves in need of divine mercy. An old legend says that God once prayed to himself and his prayer was, "May my justice be ruled by my mercy." May that be true for all of us.

"Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy." It's not that by showing mercy we earn God's mercy, but that in showing mercy to others we become open to receiving more of God's mercy, of really dwelling in it, of perceiving it's greatness. Indeed, it's true on the human level. If you show mercy to others, you tend to receive mercy yourself. What goes around comes around. And by showing mercy, you grow to be like Christ, as God intends.

Rev. David MacNaughton, a United Church minister from the Maritimes wrote a helpful little book called "The Beatitudes and Their Relevance for Today." He includes this moving story

A 17 year old girl came to him distraught and upset. She was pregnant and her mother insisted that she have an abortion. If she didn't the mother would no longer have anything to do with her. But the girl wanted to keep the baby. David MacNaughton spoke to the mother, but her heart was hard as stone. She was more concerned about the shame of what had happened and what people would say. And in a way, we can understand her reaction for this is not something we condone or want to happen to our children or grandchildren.

So the girl went to live in a home for unwed mothers. The baby was born. But then she became homesick. MacNaughton and the girl went to see her mother, not hopeful of a warm reception. When she opened the door and looked at her daughter and then into the face of her grandson, her heart melted and she received them both into her home. MacNaughton says that he will never forget baptizing that baby. Inside the church grandmother held the child tenderly and as she passed the child over to her daughter she cried out, "May God forgive me for the thoughts I had about this child." MacNaughton says, "If ever a cry for mercy reached heaven, I'm sure that one did. Gone from her face was the bitterness and shame, replaced by the proud look of a loving grandmother. She had become merciful, and in so doing had received mercy." And the girl herself, in showing mercy to the child, received mercy. But even if she had made another decision, she still could have received God's mercy and forgiveness, for no one is beyond God's love and grace. There is nothing that God cannot and will not forgive if we seek his mercy. "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."

Our second beatitude for today is "**Blessed are the pure in heart, for they**

shall see God."

What does it mean to have a pure heart? The word for pure means "unmixed, unalloyed, unadulterated," like pure, clean water. It means being pure in thought and motive. It means that you serve not because of what you might get out of it, but just because someone needs your help. A person with a pure heart is not one way with some people and another way with others. They are truthful in speech and action. They are sincere, honest and upright. They have a thirst to do what is right and good. They love and serve God with single-minded devotion. Can you think of someone with a pure heart?

Now, the truth is that you and I do not have pure hearts. You know, faith is not my problem. Any doubts I have about the Christian faith can usually be answered quite quickly. My problem is living the Christian life, trying to make my life line up with the faith I profess. In fact, the stronger my faith becomes the more I realize how far short I fall. I know my heart and I confess that according to the definition I just gave, my heart is not pure. In fact, Jesus said that our hearts are the source of our problems. He said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come..."

One night as a boy was kneeling to say his prayers he said to his mother, "Mommy, how can I ever see God if you make me shut my eyes every time I talk to him?" It's not because we've closed our eyes that we can't see God; it's because our eyes have been made blind by sin. "Though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not see."

So how can we get a pure heart? We can only receive it as a gift through the one person who had a pure heart, Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and rose again. When we trust in Him, a miracle of grace takes place. God lays Christ's pure heart over our impure heart. What God sees is a heart that makes us acceptable to him now and in the age to come. Are you trusting in Christ for a pure heart?

But we have to say that even with the heart of Christ living in us, we will not see God in this age. John tells us that "No one has ever seen God," says John, though Christ reveals his character to us. God said to Moses, "As my glory passes by, I will hide you in the cleft of the rock. My back will be seen, but you will not see my face."

So the promise of this beatitude is really for heaven. Here and now as Christ works in us our hearts do grow more pure, more trusting, more sincere. But in heaven God will finish his work in us. Job says, "Though worms destroy this