

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, March 3, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

“MERCIFUL FATHER, MERCIFUL CHILDREN”

Luke 6:36

Today we are going to speak about this quality called mercy. In Luke 6:36 Jesus said, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” But first let’s go right back to Genesis chapter 1. God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness... and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them.’ We humans are unique among God’s creatures. God created us alone in his image. So we should never feel small or insignificant. To be created in God’s image confers upon us a high status. That doesn’t mean that we are God. God is still God; and we humans are still creatures who are a little lower than their Creator. But being made in the image of God means that we humans have a special capacity to reflect God’s character in our character and our living.

Now even animals can reflect something of their Creator’s character. We see qualities such as caring and nurturing in animals. But they do it out of instinct. We reflect God’s character by growing in our relationship with God and being empowered by His Holy Spirit.

And as we reflect God’s character in our lives we are children of the Most High. To be a child of God means that God’s qualities are reflected in you. Now Jesus was and is the unique Son of God, and there are many aspects to that title. Yet one of the meanings is this. Jesus is the Son of God because he perfectly reflects God’s character, so perfectly that the New Testament calls him “the image of the invisible God.”

We are not Jesus and none of us will ever be known as the image of the invisible God. He was the Son of God; we are children of God. Yet we too we can reflect God’s character. So when Jesus tells us to “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful,” he is appealing to the fact that we are made in God’s image. As those made in God’s image we creatures can reflect God’s mercy in our own lives.

What is the mercy of God? Jesus tells us in verse 35. “God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” This is God’s mercy, that he treats the ungrateful and the wicked, not as they deserve, but with a surprising and undeserved kindness. In the Bible, mercy is God’s prime characteristic. The Hebrews discovered that despite their unfaithfulness to the covenant and their disobedience, God just wouldn’t let them go. Even when they turned from him, and there were negative consequences for doing so, God kept longing for them, caring for them, reaching out to them, seeking to restore them as his people and renew the relationship. And it wasn’t because

of their deserving, it was because of the steadfast love, the undeserved kindness, the mercy of God. In the New Testament the clearest revelation of God's mercy is the life and teachings of Jesus, and especially the cross on which he died for our sins. Yes, God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Our Father God is merciful indeed, to us, to you and to me, indeed to the whole world. So Jesus says to us who are made in God's image, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." I want us to explore this quality of mercy today with three words that begin with "r." The three words are recognize, receive and reflect.

First, we recognize our need for mercy.

A person went to have their portrait painted. The person said to the artist, "Try to do me justice." The artist replied truthfully but not too kindly, "What you need is not justice but mercy." Well, we all do. We couldn't live by strict justice alone. Just on the human level, we need mercy, kindness and understanding. Every lasting friendship, every marriage, every relationship must be sustained by mercy. One key to being a merciful person is to recognize and acknowledge your own need for mercy. In my own ministry, heavens, in my own life, I am thankful that others have shown mercy when I have blundered and made mistakes. They have encouraged me, lifted me up and given me another chance. And I am grateful. So how can I be less than merciful myself?

Unfortunately, we often want others be kind towards us without showing similar kindness to others. Again I am sometimes like this. We criticize others for the very blunders we make ourselves. We point out the speck in our neighbours' eye while overlooking the log in our own. But when you judge someone, you must apply the same standard to yourself. Now showing mercy does not mean overlooking sin and wrongdoing. But we judge and correct others and discipline others in recognition of our own need for mercy. And even the sentence we mete out is tempered by a measure of mercy. How many times we have said, "There but for the grace of God go I." John Wesley once met a man who said, "I never forgive." Wesley said, "Then you had better never sin." One theologian reminds us that "forgiving love is a possibility only for those who know themselves in need of mercy."

And we need God's mercy. Oh my, do we need it. Listen to Jesus' words. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you, and if anyone takes away your goods do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do unto you."

Now like you, I am a follower of Jesus. I must take these words seriously and seek to live by them. Someone has said these words are the GPS which guides Christian living. But do I live this way? My goodness no, certainly not always and not very consistently. I'm guessing that you don't either. In fact, go through that list - loving enemies, doing good to those who hate you, praying for those who abuse you, and so on. Only Jesus did these things perfectly. Those teachings of Jesus not only guide me; they make me aware how far short I fall. They make me aware of my need for God's mercy. And it's true for you, too. So that's the first thing - recognizing our need for mercy, for human mercy and for God's mercy. "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

Here's the second "r" word"- receive – we receive God's mercy.

If God gave us what we deserve, we would be lost. But thankfully the Father is merciful to us. Because of God's mercy I am not lost or condemned or cast aside. Yes, I am an imperfect follower of Jesus but I am still a follower. And so are you. We are still God's children and inheritors of his promises. That is because the Father is merciful and because we have received his mercy.

God's mercy is received through our faith in Christ the Saviour. As we walk with Jesus by faith we are covered with and surrounded by God's mercy. People who have not yet come to God through Jesus don't have that same assurance. They hope God might be merciful to them but they're just not sure. They fear God's judgement and even his wrath. They fear being rejected. But coming to God through Jesus gives you the assurance that the Father is merciful and that he is merciful to you and always will be. Through faith in Christ we say with great assurance, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

About ten years ago, I was in a car accident on a snowy winter's day. I was my fault. I put on the brakes and slid into the rear bumper of a big SUV. No one was hurt. There was no damage to the SUV, but considerable damage to my car. The police officer charged me with "Careless Driving" because that's what the Peel Police automatically do. But he told me that I should take the case to court. A year later I had my day in court. The other 10 people in court that day were all charged with the same offense. The crown prosecutor told us that if we pleaded guilty to a lesser charge, we could pay a smaller fine and receive 2 demerit points rather than 6. And the judge accepted it. We were all shown mercy that day.

But God's mercy in Jesus Christ is even greater. The just and loving God stepped out from behind the heavenly bench. In Jesus he took our place before his own bench of justice. He declared himself guilty instead of us. In the cross and resurrection of his sinless Son he paid our fine and bore our demerit points. There is now no charge on your record and mine because we are in Christ by faith. God's mercy is complete. His love is astounding. Through faith in God's Son we receive God's mercy. At this table our trust in Christ is strengthened and God's mercy comes to us anew.

Now the final "r" word – reflect. Jesus said, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

We talked about this at the beginning. As those who are made in the image of God, we have the capacity to reflect God's mercy in our own lives. That happens as we recognize our own need for God's mercy and receive it through faith in Christ. God's mercy to us makes us merciful towards others.

Someone said that our lives are like a riverbed which is inevitably changed by the water flowing through it. So God's mercy flowing through our lives inevitably changes our lives. Now the stream has no choice. The water just flows through it. But we can consciously choose to let God's mercy flow through us as we walk with Christ by faith. That constant flow of mercy inevitably shapes and forms us as children of the Most High who reflect the Father's mercy. By God's grace you

may even begin to love your enemies and do good to those who hate you and bless those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you and offer the other cheek to the one who strikes you and give to those who beg from you. By God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit you and I become God's merciful children.

TV news reporter Peter Arnett was visiting a town in Israel's West Bank when a bomb exploded. He was surrounded by screams of anguish and clouds of smoke. A man holding an injured girl ran up to Peter and asked for a ride to a hospital. As they sped through the streets, the man nursed the girl in the backseat. The doctors did everything to save her life, but to no avail. Peter turned to comfort the man on the loss of his child, but the man interrupted him. She wasn't his child, he said. She was a Palestinian. He was Israeli. He saw her lying in the street and decided to help. "Mister," he said through his tears, "there must come a time when we realize that we are all family." Jesus said, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Merciful Father, merciful children.