



# TOUCHSTONES

a monthly journal Unitarian Universalism

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## Mercy

## Wisdom Story



### Introduction to the Theme

It is hidden. The “it” is mercy. It is hidden within our second principle in which we affirm “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.” Mercy is implicit rather than explicit. It occupies the space between equity and compassion. And it is informed by the principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every individual. If this were not true, mercy would seldom have any standing.

Historically, mercy has been hidden to the point of being absent in some cultures. Most notable in this is the *Code of Hammurabi*, the Babylonian law code of ancient Mesopotamia that dates back to 1754 BCE. The code, which consisted of 282 laws, favored proportionate punish-

ment based on the concept of *lex talionis*. This “eye for an eye” approach used the principle of exact reciprocity. Consequently, the application of mercy was exceedingly rare in the Code of Hammurabi, unless, however, you consider mercy as the favor that those laws did grant if you were free and wealthy.

More than a thousand years later in the eighth century, Jewish prophets—Amos, Hosea, and Micah—stressed justice in their prophetic critique. As importantly, Hosea (12:6) and Micah (6:8) stressed mercy. Tragically, no mercy was shown by Nebuchadnezzar II, the Chaldean king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, when he and his army destroyed Jerusalem, including the Temple of Solomon, in 586 BCE. He took the inhabitants of Jerusalem to Babylon as prisoners. The Babylonian exile lasted between 50 and 70 years. (It is worth noting that during the Babylonian Exile, without the Temple in which to make

*(Continued on page 6)*

### The Wise Sailimai

*A Muslim folk tale, adapted*

Long, long ago in China, lived a young woman of the Muslim Hui people whose name was Sailimai. Although she was a farm girl, too poor to attend school, Sailimai paid close attention to life around her. She may have been poor and unschooled, but Sailimai possessed a wise and deep heart.

Once, her father-in-law, a carpenter named Ali, was ordered by the emperor to make some repairs in his palace. Fearful of doing less than his best for the emperor, Ali pushed himself to work both day and night until he could hardly stand. Ali accidentally tipped over the emperor’s most precious vase. It shattered—all too loudly—in the great hall. Servants came running.

Soon enough the emperor learned what happened and said, “Bring this carpenter to me at once.” Handcuffed, Ali was brought to the emperor, who drew his sword. Ali begged, “Forgive me your worship! I did not mean to break the vase. I promise to pay for it!”

The emperor laughed, “A poor, old Hui could never replace such a treasure. Do not insult me!” “Have mercy on me,” Ali begged. “I will pay.”

“Very well old Hui, I do not expect you to replace my vase,” said the emperor. “I will give you ten days to find me four things. First, find me something blacker than the bottom of a pan. Second, something clearer than a mirror. Third, something stronger than steel. And last, something as vast as the sea. If you fail, I will chop off your head.”

Ali looked stricken. “How,” he

*(Continued on page 2)*

### Mercy & Deepening Connections

Mercy allows us to forge deeper connections where little connection exists. Rather than mercy, Bryan Stevenson focuses on “just mercy” writing, “The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.” Stevenson adds, “...we all need mercy, we all need justice, and—perhaps—we all need some measure of unmerited grace.” “Just mercy” and restorative justice support connections across differences like class and race. Stevenson writes, “When you experience mercy, you learn things that are hard to learn otherwise. You see things you can’t otherwise see; you hear things you can’t otherwise hear. You begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us.” Mercy allows us to drop the tribal masks of our division.

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## Deepening Connections

## Love is Strongest

(Continued from page 1) **The Wise Sailimai** thought, “can I do this? Does the emperor simply wish to torture me for the last ten days of my life?”

Ali could neither eat nor sleep, but said nothing to his family. “Please father,” Sailimai asked, calling her father-in-law by the customary term of respect, “what is wrong?” Begging and pleading, Sailimai at last coaxed Ali into talking. He wept as he listed the emperor’s four impossible tasks. But Sailimai responded, “This isn’t a problem! Father, don’t worry. I will have all these things when the emperor comes tomorrow.”

“Don’t be silly, Sailimai,” Ali warned, “these things do not exist.” Sailimai persisted. “Father, tomorrow I will show them to both you and the emperor!”

The next day the emperor appeared at Ali’s door, “Old Hui! Come forward and give what I asked for.”

Ali came outside with Sailimai. They both bowed humbly. Sailimai then said, “The four things you requested are ready to be presented. Please name them one by one.” “The first thing,” said the emperor, “is that which is blacker than the bottom of a pan.” Sailimai said, “This can be found in the bottomless, greedy heart.”

The emperor hid his surprise. This poor farm girl cannot be so smart. He nodded, “The next thing you must present is something more clear than a mirror. Do you have that?” he asked. Sailimai answered, “Yes, knowledge offers a clarity greater than any mirror.”

The emperor looked dumbstruck. “Well,” he stammered, “Do you have something stronger than steel to give me?” “Love,” said Sailimai, “is the strongest thing in the world.” Knowing he had been bested, the emperor stood speechless. “And what do you have, that could possibly be as vast as the sea?” he asked. “A virtuous heart that shows mercy is as vast as the sea, your majesty.”

Humbled, the emperor said as he left, “Old Hui, you are pardoned!”

Sailimai held her father-in-law’s hand. Together, they bowed in relief and gratitude to Allah.

Source: <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/lovesurrounds/session1/169846.shtml>

## Go and Do Likewise

### The One Who Showed Mercy



And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

He said to him, “What is written in the law? How do you read?”

And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

And he said to him, “You have answered right; do this, and you will live.” But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down the road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denari and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, “Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.”

Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?” He said, “The one who showed mercy on him.”

And Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Source: Luke 10: 25-37

## Fierce & Merciful

### The Lantern of Soul

Clarissa Pinkola Estes

My friends, do not lose heart. We were made for these times. I have heard from so many recently who are deeply and properly bewildered. They are concerned about the state of affairs in our world now. Ours is a time of almost daily astonishment and often righteous rage over the latest degradations of what matters most to civilized, visionary people.

...In any dark time, there is a tendency to veer toward fainting over how much is wrong or unmended in the world. Do not focus on that. There is a tendency, too, to fall into being weakened by dwelling on what is outside your reach, by what cannot yet be. Do not focus there.

...Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. Any small, calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world, will help immensely. It is not given to us to know which acts or by whom, will cause the critical mass to tip toward an enduring good.

What is needed for dramatic change is an accumulation of acts, adding, adding to, adding more, continuing. We know that it does not take everyone on Earth to bring justice and peace, but only a small, determined group who will not give up during the first, second, or hundredth gale.

...To display the lantern of soul in shadowy times like these—to be fierce and to show mercy toward others; both are acts of immense bravery and greatest necessity.



Source: <https://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=2195>

## Readings from the Common Bowl

**Day 1:** "Every one of us is, in the cosmic perspective, precious. If a human disagrees with you, let him live.



In a hundred billion galaxies, you will not find another." Carl Sagan

**Day 2:** "And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Micah 6:8

**Day 3:** "Religion carries two sorts of people in two entirely opposite directions: the mild and gentle people it carries towards mercy and justice; the persecuting people it carries into fiendish, sadistic cruelty." Alfred North Whitehead

**Day 4:** "The world will give you that once in a while, a brief timeout; the boxing bell rings and you go to your corner, where somebody dabs mercy on your beat-up life." Sue Monk Kidd

**Day 5:** "Rats and roaches live by competition under the laws of supply and demand; it is the privilege of human beings to live under the laws of justice and mercy." Wendell Berry

**Day 6:** "Mercy, I think, doesn't the human race know anything about mercy?" Charles Bukowski

**Day 7:** "10 percent of any population is cruel, no matter what, and 10 percent is merciful, no matter what, and the remaining 80 percent can be moved in either direction." Susan Sontag

**Day 8:** "The longer I live, the more I read, the more patiently I think, and the more anxiously I inquire, the less I seem to know.... Do justly. Love mercy. Walk humbly. This is enough." John Adams

**Day 9:** "Only the man who has had to face despair is really convinced that he needs mercy. Those who do not want mercy never seek it. ...A life that is without problems may literally be more hopeless than one that always verges on despair." Thomas Merton

**Day 10:** "For Mercy has a human heart / Pity, a human face: / And Love, the human form divine, / And Peace, the human dress." William Blake

**Day 11:** "I don't ever want to live in a world where something like mercy...or maybe it's compassion...is the *wrong* choice." Jonathan Maberry

**Day 12:** "...and Heaven have mercy on us all—Presbyterians and Pagans alike—for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly need mending." Herman Melville

**Day 13:** "Blessed are the merciful: for every act of love and caring is returned to us one hundred-fold. A universal law of every human philosophy teaches us to love our neighbor as we would ourselves be loved." Jeff Liebmann

**Day 14:** "To protect what is wild is to protect what is gentle. Perhaps the wilderness we fear is the pause between our own heartbeats, the silent space that says we live only by grace. Wilderness lives by this same grace. Wild mercy is in our hands." Terry Tempest Williams



**Day 15:** "Mercy is the stuff you give to people that don't deserve it." Joyce Meyer

**Day 16:** "We have not yet encountered any god who is as merciful as a man who flicks a beetle over on its feet." Annie Dillard

**Day 17:** "Your heart has to be prepared ahead of time through faith and prayer and grace and mercy and love and forgiveness so you can keep your heart open in hell, when hell happens." Richard Rohr

**Day 18:** "Grace accepts a person as someone worthy of kindness despite whatever grime or hard-shell casing keeps him or her separated from the rest of the world. Grace is a gift of tender mercy when it makes the least sense." Charles R. Swindoll

**Day 19:** "Computers are like Old Testament gods; lots of rules and no mercy." Joseph Campbell

**Day 20:** "Two things in life are infinite; the stupidity of man and the mercy of God." G.I. Gurdjieff

**Day 21:** "Do not just seek happiness for yourself. Seek happiness for all. Through kindness. Through mercy." David Levithan

**Day 22:** "To show mercy is not naïve. To hold out against the end of hope is not stupidity or madness. It is fundamentally human. ...You may think I'm stupid, you may call me a madman and a fool, but at least I stand upright in a fallen world." Rick Yancey

**Day 23:** "Be grateful for small mercies." Alexandra Adornetto

**Day 24:** "Those who feel no need for mercy usually never seek it and almost never bestow it." Jeffery R. Holland

**Day 25:** "I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice." Abraham Lincoln

**Day 26:** "To be able to laugh and to be merciful are the only things that make man better than the beast." Ruskin Bond

**Day 27:** "That's what mercy is... it's choosing to help, or forgive, or love even when it goes against all logic." Laura Anderson Kurk

**Day 28:** "My father always told me that in this world we are going to make a truckload of mistakes, but the best mistake we can ever make is to err on the side of mercy." Joan Bauer

**Day 29:** "You are merciful... when you forgive in others the faults you condemn in yourself." Nikhil Saluja

**Day 30:** "I believe in peace. I believe in mercy." Malala Yousafzai

**Day 31:** "Love, Mercy, and Grace, sisters all, attend your wounds of silence and hope." Aberjhani



## To Love Mercy

Rev. Gary E. Smith

"The quality of mercy is not strain'd," says Portia to Shylock in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*.... "It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice bless'd: it blesseth him that gives and him that takes.... It is an attribute to God himself; and earthly power doth then show likest God's, when mercy seasons justice.... We do pray for mercy," she says, "and that same prayer doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy."

"You know what is good," Micah says, "and what is required of you, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

...[I]t's interesting ...what Micah puts first, in fact, what he puts first and second, and then what he saves for last. The first two, do justly and love mercy, have to do with our relationships, one human being to another. It is only the third in which he explicitly puts in the relationship with God, with whatever the holy is in your life. To do justly and to love mercy ...has everything to do with how we live out our lives with one another.

Annie Dillard, writing in *Holy the Firm*, asks the question, "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place? There is no one but us," she says. "There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time [and do you hear the irony?], that our innocent fathers are all dead—as if innocence had ever been—and our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures, and grown exhausted, unable to seek the thread, weak, and involved. But there is no one but us. There never has been."

... What is required of us? To do justly and to love mercy. We are called to be the instruments of justice and mercy

in this world. "There is no one but us."

...What is required of us, what ultimately matters in this world, what will we make of our lives, this span of years we are given? Life rushes on. It does not stop. "Love mercy," says Micah.... Other translations say, "love kindness" or "love loyalty." Weave all three words together, mercy, kindness and loyalty, and what emerges ...is the fabric of compassion, a quality of asking nothing in return.... "Love mercy," says Micah, and ... remember ... the word "mercy," in the story of the *Good Samaritan*, in the walk along the Jericho Road.

"Who is my neighbor?" Jesus is asked, and Jesus tells the story of the man walking along the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, where he is beaten, robbed, and left for dead. The priest goes by, the Levite goes by; the Samaritan does not go by. The Samaritan is moved with pity, he bandages the wounds and takes care of him. "Which of these was the neighbor?" Jesus asks the disciples. "The one who showed mercy," reply the disciples. Peter Fleck answered Jesus' very same question.... "Our neighbor is not necessarily somebody we like," Peter said, "nor somebody we admire or are beholden to, not somebody who might one day be useful to us or who happens to be living next door. Our neighbor is anybody who needs us."

... "Love mercy...." Micah did not say, "be merciful" or "do mercy." He said "love mercy," which ...means take mercy into yourself and embrace it. Don't let it go. Let mercy become a part of who you are. And, if you do this, you will learn something about forgiveness and forbearance.

... "Love mercy," says Micah, and the loving part says ... that this is not just a one-time kind of thing, as in "we stopped once along the road for a neighbor, and now we've done that." When we know how to love mercy, when we say in our very bones that to love mercy is somehow required of us, that this is a piece of

what matters in this life, then we learn that we must stop by the Jericho roadside again and again and again.

... "Love mercy," says Micah to us, and isn't he saying please be careful of the narrow limits we set upon one another. Be careful of the strictness by which we judge one another. Watch for the zeal with which we become all puffed up with our own self-righteousness. Love mercy, for God's sake. Mercy... seasons the strict justice we might wish to inflict on another. "Spirit of Life come unto me. Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion." What is the face of this Spirit of Life? It could be the face of one whose mercy you need in these days, who has some absolutely justifiable reason to want to hurt you, make you pay, and who instead resists inflicting harm, and even more than that, extends to you a gesture of kindness. It is undeserved. It is unexpected. It is a moment of grace and of loving mercy, bringing some of us to our knees.

...Rilke writes..., "Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in." Mercy can move in us like a big shadow, and who knows what our lives can become? "We do pray for mercy," says Shakespeare, "and that same prayer does teach us all to render the deeds of mercy," which is to say, when we had thought all along that our prayers to God would bring mercy, our prayers will only be made manifest in our deeds, precisely when we come to love mercy.

"We cannot merely pray to you, O God," says a prayer in the *Kerem Shalom* prayer book, "for we must find our own paths... Therefore, we pray instead for strength, determination, and willpower, to do, instead of just to pray, to become, instead of merely to wish." "Who shall stand in God's holy place?" Annie Dillard says, "There is no one but us. There is no one to send... but only us... we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures, and grown exhausted.... But there is no one but us." ... [W]e are the ones to love mercy. We are instruments to one another of our own salvation.

## Family Matters

### Horton Hears a Who!

Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat

...[T]he ...screen adaptation of Dr. Seuss' 1954 children's book *Horton Hears a Who!* ...delivers many ethical messages ... about tolerance, caring, service to all....



At the center of the story is Horton..., a caring elephant who ... lives in the jungle of Nool.... One day he hears a noise coming from a tiny speck of dust floating past him. Through patience and curiosity, Horton eventually learns that this little particle houses a city named Who-ville inhabited by many tiny citizens led by the Mayor. The elephant, who is known for his faithfulness (always 100%), decides that it is his mission to save the speck. His personal creed is "a person's a person no matter how small."

Even though they cannot see each other and are in completely different and alien worlds, Horton and the Mayor establish a caring relationship based on trust and ...listening. Horton tenderly places the speck on a clover flower and sets out to find it a safe place to reside.

...Horton faces a formidable obstacle in Kangaroo, a power-hungry do-gooder who winces when she learns that Horton believes he has made contact with a realm that he can't see or touch. ...In

order to stop Horton, she arranges to have Vlad Vlad-I-Koff, a large and ragged black-bottomed eagle, to get rid of the particle.

...Back in Who-ville, the Mayor tries to deal with his own problems.... But his biggest challenge is to convince his con-

stituents that they are in danger; after all, nothing in Who-ville had ever gone wrong.

...Watch closely how this story deals with the villainy of Kangaroo, who tries to make sure that Horton's mission of mercy ends in disaster.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/films.php?id=17936>

For information about the film go to <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/horton-hears-a-who2008>

### Family Activity: Kindness

Watch the movie or read the book. See a video (17:10) of a reading of the book by Praise Church at <https://vimeo.com/251748181>. Discuss who is kind and who is not, and why. Then discuss how we respond to kindness, and how we respond when we are not treated kindly, and why. Why did Horton do what he did?

You might want to consult a discussion resource for the book at <https://www.prindleinstitute.org/books/horton-hears-a-who/>

### Traveling Mercies: Why I Make Sam Go to Church

Anne LaMott

Sam is the only kid he knows of who goes to church, who is made to go to church two or three times a month. He rarely wants to.

This is not exactly true. The truth is he never wants to go. What 7-year-old would rather be in church than hanging out with a friend? It does not help him to be reminded that once he's there he enjoys himself, that he gets to spend the time drawing in the little room outside the sanctuary, that he only actually has to sit still and listen during the short children's sermon.

It does not help that I always pack some snacks, some Legos, his art supplies, and any friend of his whom we can lure into our churchy web. It does not help that he genuinely cares for the people there. ...

...You might wonder why I make this strapping, exuberant boy come with me.... I make him because I can. I outweigh him by nearly 75 pounds.

But that is only part of it. The main reason is that most of the people I know who are doing well psychologically, who seem conscious, ...who have what I want—connection, gratitude, joy—are people in community. And this funky little church. It is where I was taken in when I had nothing to give, and it has become in the truest, deepest sense, my home. My home-base.

...Believe me, church was the last place I would have ever imagined wanting to be; and so I understand why now it is the last place Sam wants to be. I think he would almost rather spend Sunday mornings getting his teeth cleaned.

"Let's go, baby," I say cheerfully when it is time for us to leave for church, and he looks up at me like a puppy eyeing the vet who is standing there holding the needle.

Source: *Traveling Mercies* by Anne Lamott

(Continued from page 1)

sacrifices, Passover began a transformation that led to some additions to the Passover Seder that have survived to this day, including the presence of an egg on the Passover plate as a symbol of the Temple sacrifices that were no longer possible.) Both ancient and recent history attests to the fact that the human experiment has struggled with justice, and even more so with mercy.

In Hebrew, the word *hesed* (or *chesed*) is variously translated as “mercy,” “lovingkindness,” “steadfast love,” “compassion,” and even “goodness.” Commenting on Micah 6:8, biblical scholar P.J. King suggested that “*hesed* is the response made not out of duty but out of love.”

Classical philosopher Martha Nussbaum in her essay *Equity and Mercy* draws a distinction between strict justice (in Greek known as *dike*) and a concept of justice (*epieikeia*) that is conditioned by both equity and mercy. The influence of Seneca (c. 4 BCE – 65 CE), a Roman philosopher, on Nussbaum is significant. She argues in favor of the Senecan ideal of a merciful justice which also considers the perpetrator’s story and all the particulars of the case, and which then reacts with mildness and sympathy, rather than with strict proportionality. In his two-volume essay on mercy (*De Clementia*) written to and for Nero, Seneca placed a particular responsibility on the ruler to resist anger and show mercy. Obviously, Nero was not a very good student.

Mercy is always tied to justice, for if no punishment is involved then mercy is not necessary. Of this, ethicist Rushworth Kidder (*How Good People Make Tough Choices*) made a thoughtful distinction. He wrote, “Compelled to choose between justice and mercy, I would (all things being equal) stick with mercy, which to me speaks of love and compassion. One reason: I can imagine a world so full of love that justice, as we now know it, would no longer be necessary. But I cannot imagine a world so full of justice that there would no longer be any need for love.”

Justice seeks to apply laws impartially in order to be consistent and fair in their

application. As such “laws are not designed” writes Unitarian Universalist minister Charlotte Cowtan, “to deal with particulars, with special contingencies, or individual circumstances. When ...equity and law are in conflict, our human system of law is designed to give precedence to equity.” *Justitia*, the Roman goddess of justice, is traditionally portrayed as holding the scales of justice and a sword, and wearing a blindfold to ensure that justice is handed out equally without fear or favor. Equity requires that Lady Justice lift the blindfold enough to see the particulars of a situation and then temper judgment accordingly. Equity recommends judicial leniency as the means to achieve a more perfect justice than would be possible without it. Equity acknowledges that objective judgment is elusive such that in a specific case all may be better served by situational judgment. As one writer observed, “equity allows the spirit of the law to override the letter of the law.”

Mercy seeks to go beyond law and equity to compassion. G.W. Rainbolt considers mercy an independent, imperfect virtue that tempers justice. This is remarkable, he concludes, because no one has a right to mercy. In fact, mercy is often granted where severity is merited. S. H. Hodgson defined mercy as “the justice of Love.”

The impulse toward mercy requires empathy. One must have some sense of the reality and struggle of the person, as well as the impact on his or her future if mercy is extended, because the fruits of mercy are often amazing. At root, mercy is enshrined in the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you,” but there is a greater truth than this: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you, because the other is you.” The prophet Micah got it right so long ago. To love mercy is to value it highly. To love mercy is to understand its redemptive power precisely because we do not deserve mercy. To love mercy is to offer it when it makes the least sense. To love mercy is to love.

### Kindness [as Mercy]

Naomi Shihab Nye

Before you know what kindness really is  
you must lose things,  
feel the future dissolve in a moment  
like salt in a weakened broth.  
What you held in your hand,  
what you counted and carefully saved,  
all this must go so you know  
how desolate the landscape can be  
between the regions of kindness.  
How you ride and ride  
thinking the bus will never stop,  
the passengers eating maize and chicken  
will stare out the window forever.  
Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,  
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho  
lies dead by the side of the road.  
You must see how this could be you,  
how he too was someone  
who journeyed through the night with plans  
and the simple breath that kept him alive.  
Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,  
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
You must speak to it till your voice



catches the thread  
of all sorrows  
and you see the  
size of the cloth.  
Then it is only  
kindness that  
makes sense any-  
more,  
only kindness that  
ties your shoes  
and sends you out  
into the day to mail  
letters and pur-  
chase bread,  
only kindness that raises its head  
from the crowd of the world to say  
it is I you have been looking for,  
and then goes with you everywhere  
like a shadow or a friend.

Source: <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/kindness>

## All the Days of Life

### Have Mercy

*Rev. Marlin Lavanhar*

Laurence Sterne wrote: "We may imitate the Deity in all his moral attributes, but mercy is the only one in which we can pretend to equal him. We cannot indeed, give like God, but surely we may forgive like him."

Mercy involves power. To show mercy to you, I must have something to offer you that I can choose to either give or withhold. Mercy is a way of using our power to show love and compassion. Most importantly, mercy is offered whether a person deserves it or not. In this sense mercy runs counter to justice.

If justice is about making things fair and giving someone her due, mercy involves offering love and forgiveness even when a person may rightly deserve to be punished or shunned. An impoverished employee who steals from his boss to feed his hungry children could justifiably be fired or put in jail. However, being merciful might entail dropping the charges and even giving the worker a raise in his hourly wage.

...The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in modern South Africa is a great example of the power of mercy. When South African apartheid ended, there was a decision by those in power not to seek justice alone. They decided the country would benefit more by knowing the truth than from exacting punishment for the crimes of the past. So they gave amnesty to the perpetrators who committed violence and crime during apartheid if those people shared the truth about what they had done. In other words, at that point in their history, South Africans regarded mercy and truth as higher values than justice. Such a rare achievement of mercy takes faith in humankind and the power of love and forgiveness.

As human beings we all fumble and fail sometimes and in the process, we are truly fortunate when those we have wronged give us a second chance or an opportunity to try again. In the words of the Psalmist: "May goodness and mercy follow you all the days of your life."

Source: Simple Gifts, All Souls Journal, May 2008

## Mercy Over Justice

### The Beatitude of Mercy

The *Beatitudes* are the eight blessings in the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew attributed to Jesus where he said, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy." The picture below where the woman is breaking a sword calls for mercy more than justice.



The Tiffany windows in the Arlington Street Church (Unitarian Universalist) are famous for their beauty of design and execution and are believed to be the largest collection of Tiffany windows in any one church. They follow a general plan adopted in 1898 and were installed between 1898 and 1933.

The windows represent the highest development of American art in glass. Special Tiffany techniques were used, such as painting certain details and multiple layers of opalescent glass to achieve desired shades of color and Tiffany's unique creation of folds and drapes.

The windows in the galleries, illustrative of the Beatitudes, were designed by Frederick Wilson. The windows on the main floor are from designs by different artists. All of the windows were made under the supervision of Mr. Louis Comfort Tiffany and Mr. Edward S. George.

Source: <http://www.ascboston.org/about/building.html>

## Seeing Beyond Faults

### Mercy Personified

*Kate Starr & Rev. Tamara Lebak*

Drug dealers and pimps, burglars and wife batterers who have served their time, think Mercy is nothing but the janitor at their half-way house, which Mercy actually owns and operates. And that's fine by him. They tend to talk more, he says, if they believe he's no better than they are.

Mercy has a gift—the ability to pardon a person's past. He sees beyond prison-yard muscles and amateur tattoos, behind the façade of hateful, scared eyes and into the center of hardened hearts where everyone still seems innocent and blameless.

Mercy gives his gift freely to average people in common situations too – angry drivers in traffic, a sour waitress, the man who follows him at the hardware store, the teenager who locks her doors when she sees Mercy crossing the intersection, name callers, the media, the government.

Mercy is a pen pal to hundreds of inmates, and answers Santa letters from kids of the incarcerated. His grammar is bad and his spelling is poor. The son of a share-cropper, Mercy did field work instead of homework. At age 16 he joined the Army where he eventually served as a medic. Mercy was known to have compassion so deep he would even help a man die to end his suffering.

On Saturday nights, Mercy changes his work boots for white patent leather dancing shoes and a spin with the ladies at the local VFW hall. His matching suit makes for a dramatic contrast to his ageless ebony skin.

The trumpeter who plays swing tunes has encouraged him to host a weekly coffeehouse for musicians, slam poets, rappers, blues singers, and other original performers of all kinds. It's a place of inspiration and hope, an alternative to drugs and street life.

Someday, Mercy would like to be a foster parent. He thinks he could save lives – change them early with love, not correct them later with punishment. Mercy would give them a second chance. And a third ... and a fourth ... As many as they needed. Whether they deserved it or not.

Source: Simple Gifts, All Souls Journal, May 2008

## Theme for Discussion

### Mercy

**Preparation prior to Gathering:** (Read this issue of the journal and *Living the Questions* in the next column.)

**Business:** Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

**Opening Words:** “I always knew that deep down in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than the opposite.” *Nelson Mandela*

**Chalice Lighting** (James Vila Blake) (adapted) (In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

**Check-In:** How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

**Claim Time for Deeper Listening:** This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

**Read the Wisdom Story:** Take turns reading aloud parts of the story on page 1.

**Readings from the Common Bowl:** Group members read selections from *Readings from the Common Bowl* (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

**Sitting In Silence:** Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions*).

**Reading:** “You cannot be fair to others without first being fair to yourself. Know that a well-honed sense of justice is a measure of personal experience, and all experience is a measure of self. Know that the highest expression of justice is mercy.

Thus, as the supreme judge in your own court, you must have compassion for yourself. Otherwise, cede your gavel.”

*Vera Nazarian*

**Living the Questions:** Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving on.

1. What were you taught about mercy as a child? How have those lessons informed your actions throughout your life?
2. Have you ever needed mercy from another? What were the circumstances? Did you receive mercy or not? How did the experience affect your understanding of mercy, both given and received?
3. What makes it hard for people to be merciful toward others?
4. When should mercy be given? When should it be withheld?
5. Some suggest that mercy makes a mockery of justice. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
6. What are the connections that you would draw between justice, equity, compassion, and mercy?
7. Why should we “love mercy?”

The facilitator or group members are invited to propose additional questions that they would like to explore.

**Deeper Listening:** If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person who claimed time.

**Checking-Out:** One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together exploring the theme.

### Extinguishing Chalice

(Elizabeth Selle Jones) (In unison)

*We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.*

### Closing Words Rev. Philip R. Giles

(In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*



## Moment of Mercy

When the fog lifted, the Union soldiers made their attack. It was December, 1862, and General Ambrose E.



Burnside’s men were ready to storm Fredericksburg—but the Confederates had other plans in mind. In a surprise attack, the Rebels rained down gunfire until nearly 6,300 Union soldiers lay dead or wounded. As the echoes of muskets faded, the moaning of dying men filled the cold December night.

When the dawn broke, the cries of agony were too much for 19-year-old Confederate Sergeant Richard R. Kirkland. He went to his commander and said, “Sir, I’d like to take those boys water.” His commander replied, “Son, you’re a dang fool.”

Kirkland jumped the wall, where he was instantly greeted by a hail of gunfire. As he leaned over a wounded Union Soldier and raised a canteen to his lips, the Union commander looked on at the mission of mercy. In awe, he raised his hand and shouted down the line, “Don’t shoot that man! He’s too brave to die.”

Sculptor: Terry Jones

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Moment\\_of\\_Mercy\\_\(3412860347\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Moment_of_Mercy_(3412860347).jpg)

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