

Listening for Mercy  
Fourth in a Lenten Series  
Jn. 3  
March 14, 2021  
Pastor Jenothy Irvine

**Prayer** - Teach us to listen. Teach us to hear. Then teach us to listen again. In your mercy, amen.

**Message**

“She asks me to kill the spider.  
Instead, I get the most  
peaceful weapons I can find.

I take a cup and a napkin.  
I catch the spider, put it outside  
and allow it to walk away.

If I am ever caught in the wrong place  
at the wrong time, just being alive  
and not bothering anyone,

I hope I am greeted  
with the same kind  
of mercy.”

— **Rudy Francisco, Helium**

Mercy - the compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.

He knew everything about her - the kind of woman she was, the relationships she had, how people talked about her, and the word on the street regarding her character. He was the only one who felt her pain and need; the only one who stopped in his tracks to help.

He knew the father's heart was broken. He knew also, that the older brother was angry and resentful. He didn't have the answers to their why questions, yet he was the only one who heard the cry of the lost son?

Mercy - the compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.

A woman, married 5 different times and ostracized by her community.

A business man who cheated his clients.

A man who turned his back on God.

A homeless person who lives wherever a bed or a meal can be found; ignored by others.

An educated religious man who questions his faith.

A prostitute seeking second chances.

A sick woman who no one could help.

A rich man.

A lost soul.

These stories are our stories. Recorded in the bible, they echo throughout humanity. Stories of brokenness, anger, pride, disappointment, shame, fear, and failure. Stories of longing, grief, heartbreak, tears, doubt,

uncertainty, and defeat. And in every single case, mercy was the gift given and the beginning of healing and wholeness.

Mercy - the compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.

The last four weeks we opened a conversation to learn and re-learn what it means to listen; reflect on how to listen with all that we are; with our heart, body, soul, and mind and why that is so important when it comes to our walk with God.

This week, we continue crossing the wilderness of Lent and today we ask what does it mean to listen for mercy - how can listening be an act of mercy and love? What does mercy sound like?

I think before we answer such questions, it is valuable to understand what we are listening for. So let's look at the definition of mercy, which I have already shared a few times at the beginning of my sermon.

*Mercy is defined as the compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.* Simply put, it is the act of forgiving someone or letting someone off the hook who you could otherwise hurt or punish. Is that it? Is that all there is? Yes and no.

Yes - there are some things that happen in life that you can let go; no big deal, no harm done. AND No - there are other things that happen;

deeper things; heart and soul things that take more emotional work, greater wisdom and maturity to understand the depth, value, and gift of true mercy.

In the Lenten devotional we are sharing together, this week, you will read a piece by Robbin Brent. She talks about the moment when something in her understanding of mercy “cracked wide open” her being. Listen to how she came to expand her definition of mercy:

My initial understanding of mercy was that it was something God, or others, bestowed on me, feeling sorry for me or in some ways pitying me, and deciding to give me another chance. It wasn't until my teacher, Cythia Bourgeault, unpacked mercy that something cracked wide open in my being. Cynthia referred to mercy as a holy act of exchange, something of value both given and received. This, based on the root for the word mercy being merc, the root also forming the words commerce and merchant; words that at one point were associated with respect and dignity. The deeper root of the word “exchange,” - connected with the French merci, with grateful response and kindness of heart and finally to compassion and forgiveness, where we are able to open ourselves to the Mercy that frees all faults, which is the ultimate exchange.

When a person experiences true mercy, there is indeed a sense of gratitude, humility, and thankfulness. When two people respect each other and seek to live with dignity and to treat one another with dignity, there is a kindness of heart, there is compassion, and forgiveness, there is a recognition of the other. That's not to say it comes easy or that it is all neat and tidy. It is sometimes hard and definitely can be messy, but it is

doable. We must be willing to listen for understanding and not just to reply, defend, or respond.

It is then that listening can be an act of great mercy. Listening to the stories of those around us - giving time and space for the telling and the sharing; allowing the brokenness to surface, the fear or anger to be expressed, the apology or pain to be spoken. Mercy is more than a shallow "it's o.k." "whatever, don't do it again" kind of thing. Rather, it rises from a depth of soul that recognizes the value of being heard and being seen. It is a compassion for and a forgiveness of another person's struggle and shortcoming because it recognizes their own.

The single greatest act of mercy is recorded in John chapter three, where we are reminded of just how merciful God is. Listen and receive.

Read Text - John 3:14-21

Do you ever wonder if the people in Jesus' day had a clue? Right before this section is where Nicodemus, an educated religious leader and prominent man in the community cannot seem to figure out that Jesus is talking in metaphor and symbolism when he said a person must be born again. Nicodemus can't figure out how a grown person can enter the womb and come out again. It's almost comical. He was so focussed on getting it right, he missed the point altogether. The point that one must be born of the Spirit.

But then I think about us - those who follow Jesus today. I look at how divided we are. How angry we get over things. How impatient we are with one another. How volatile things can become. How much we obsess over being right and making sure everyone knows it. How blind we are to our own weaknesses. How we move from one distraction to another never fully addressing the issue.

I wonder if people will read about us one day and think, they didn't have a clue either.

We don't have to look very far or very hard to see that people are imperfect beings. It doesn't take much to realize the evidence of just how cruel, violent, and hateful people can be. You don't have to be very old or have much experience on this earth to realize how unfair, unjust, and unkind this world is.

It is easy to see that when any one person allows anger, power, arrogance, bitterness, jealousy, or pain to come between them and the presence and purpose of God, between them and the teachings of Jesus, between them and another human being, there, darkness rules, sin prevails, and evil wins.

Whoo! My American Baptist roots are shaking and waving and shouting amen! Oh yes, we are worms..."a wretch like me" right?! We don't deserve God's grace for we all fall short. BUT lets be clear, church, let's be clear - that is **not** the end of the story! That is not the end of the story!

For according to our text today, mercy gets the last word if we listen! Mercy gets to be the author of how our story ends, if we but hand her the pen.

In other words, by the mercy of God we find our way out of the darkness and by offering mercy to others, we find our way to deeper, more meaningful relationships; we find our way through to forgiveness, wholeness, community, and growth.

It's been said that there is a place, a moment, a breath that changes everything. There is an experience, a glimpse, or an insight where something bigger than ourselves breaks through the toughest of relationships, the worst of circumstances, or thickest of grudges; a place where hearts are healed and people are changed. Those moments are what some have come to call, "thin places."

"A thin place is where the realm of the divine and the realm of the human seem in particularly close proximity, where the boundary between our reality and God's seems especially porous and permeable. It is a powerful / beautiful metaphor for what happens when we allow ourselves to be taken there." -The Reverend Dr. Paul Hooker Associate Dean for Ministerial Formation and Advanced Studies Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

I wonder church, how would life be different if we listened for mercy? How would relationships change if we used our listening as an act of

mercy? Could it be that when we do, we open ourselves up to the healing, peace, and hope that we all long for? Could it be that listening is the answer to so many of our questions, barriers, divisions, harsh judgements, and intolerance? Could it be church, that God is teaching us to listen for and offer up mercy to those around us; those we disagree with, hold a grudge toward, or perhaps those who have hurt our feelings, or have different ideas but the same God as we do?

Can we allow ourselves to look for, experience or even co-create those thin places? Can we listen for mercy? Can our listening be an act of mercy for someone else? Can we experience a thin moment when the struggle of our humanity brushes up against the reality of God's divinity.

God gave us the ultimate gift of compassion and forgiveness in the life of Jesus. Jesus gave us the model, the formula, the strategy for how to live our lives. The question is, are you listening? Are we listening?

We are just over half way through this journey we call Lent. A journey into the wild places of the heart. A journey of self reflection across the landscape of our lives, asking the hard questions, seeking the difficult answers, and trusting the truth that comes through the other side. This week we continue to ask:

Are you listening church?

Are you listening people of God?

Are you listening?

With all that I am, I pray it be so. AMEN

Extras:

“The Lord's mercy often rides to the door of our heart upon the black horse of affliction.”

— **Charles Spurgeon**

“Night is a time of rigor, but also of mercy. There are truths which one can see only when it's dark”

— **Isaac Bashevis Singer, Teibele And Her Demon**

If there is a single definition of healing it is to enter with mercy and awareness those pains, mental and physical, from which we have withdrawn in judgment and dismay. (48)”

— **Stephen Levine, A Year to Live: How to Live This Year as If It Were Your Last**