

“Grace Amidst a Focused Life”
Matthew 5:7-8 – March 13, 2016

INTRO: “The beatitudes are a summons to live in the present in the way that will make sense in God’s promised future; because that future has arrived in the present in Jesus of Nazareth. It may seem upside down, but we are called to believe, with great daring, that it is in fact the right way up. Try it and see.” (Tom Wright)

Yuval Roth is Jewish and lives in Tel Aviv. He makes countless trips between his home on the Mediterranean coast, to drive people through Checkpoint 300, the main passageway leading to Palestinian-controlled Bethlehem, to Israeli-controlled Jerusalem. Over the past decade, Roth has made it his daily business to transport Palestinians needing medical treatment from army checkpoints to Israeli hospitals. We might wonder why he does this—why make this lengthy and potentially dangerous journey? Roth says: “These encounters break down barriers. Everything the Palestinians knew about us, and everything we knew about them simply disintegrates. Getting to know Palestinians in the car is like making peace for an hour. These encounters give me hope.” Roth’s brother, Ehud, was kidnapped by a Hamas cell in the Gaza Strip while serving on military reserve duty. Ehud and another reservist were killed. As a staunch believer in peaceful coexistence between Jews and Arabs, Roth decided to mobilize his pain in the cause of education. He began sharing his personal story with Israeli high school students, alongside a Palestinian counterpart. And one day, a Palestinian member of the group asked Roth for a favor—could Roth drive his sick brother from a checkpoint on the Palestinian occupied West Bank, to a hospital in Haifa. Roth agreed, and things began to snowball. He couldn’t handle all the requests on his own, so a group of volunteers, called The Road to Recovery was formed. Today it has some 400 active Israeli volunteers, who drive patients safely to their destinations, patients who may speak no Hebrew, don’t know the Israeli transportation system, and have little money for the trip. What is so amazing about Roth’s actions, is that he is caring for Palestinians, and his brother was killed by Hamas, a fundamentalist Palestinian group. He is offering mercy and compassion to a surprising group of people, given his own personal experience (*The Christian Science Monitor*, 3/14/16)

One definition of mercy is “showing kindness in excess of what is deserved.” (Mary Lou Redding) I don’t know that we could make a judgment about whether the kindness Mr. Roth shows is in excess of what is deserved, but it certainly goes beyond what might be expected.

Will Rogers tells a true story of an incident that happened when he was a young cowboy in Claremore, Oklahoma. One of his steers broke through a fence and began to eat his neighbor's corn. Because of this the neighboring farmer killed Will's steer. He should have told Will what he had done but he didn't. When Will found out what had happened, he was furious. Will and his hired man mounted their horses and began to ride down the road to the neighbor's farm. As they rode, a blue norther struck and by the time they arrived they were covered with ice. The farmer's wife said her husband was not home, but invited the two of them into the house to wait by the fire. Will noticed how thin the wife was, and how scrawny the five children were. The farmer finally returned, and shook hands with Will and his hired man, unaware of the reason for their visit. As the storm outside grew worse, the farmer invited the two visitors to stay for supper and overnight. The farmer then apologized for having nothing but beans for supper. He said that the storm had interrupted the butchering of his steer. (Will’s steer) As they all ate together, Will Rogers laughed and joked with the family. He noticed how the eyes of the children lit up every time they mentioned the beef they were going to eat the next day. As they rode back home the next morning, the hired man asked Will why he had not confronted the farmer about the steer he slaughtered. After some moments of silence, Will replied, "I intended to, but then I got to thinking. You know I really didn't lose that steer. I just traded it for a little human happiness. There are millions of steers in the world, but human happiness is kinda scarce." (*Emphasis*)

“Mercy frees us from the need to ‘fix’ whatever is wrong. Mercy is able quite simply to love, to be compassionate, whether the hurt is curable or not, whether the wrong can be righted or not.” (James Howell)

“Mercy is not merely feeling sympathy. Mercy is extended by one who has the power to condemn or punish but chooses not to. Mercy is important because God will show mercy to those who are merciful.” (Mary Lou Redding)

“The fifth Beatitude is unique: it is reflexive. Those who show mercy receive exactly what they just showed: mercy. Was Jesus not quick enough on his feet to think of a different word? Or is a secret unveiled? Does Jesus, perhaps with a wink, commend the merciful, knowing all too well that the hidden key that unlocks the treasure of being merciful is our receiving mercy?” (James Howell)

“As we practice mercy, we enlarge our capacity for it.” (Mary Lou Redding)

I’m reminded of the talk show hosts, or late-night comedy hosts, who when the audience keeps applauding them, then the hosts says something like “right back at ya,” indicating the affection they are receiving is to go right back to the audience. When we offer mercy to others, it comes right back to us.

In our Confirmation class this past week, I shared the story about the UW Madison student who is Jewish, whose dorm room door had taped onto it a large paper swastika and a picture of Adolf Hitler. One student who took responsibility was disciplined, and a “Town Hall on Anti-Semitism” was held on campus. The student whose door was defaced called it an “insensitive joke/prank gone wrong by two people who had no idea what they were doing.” He said he didn’t want to “demonize two guys that he had gotten to know well and who were not cognizant of how anti-Semitic their actions were.” (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* 2-18-16)

In our Confirmation class this week, we talked about how this fellow took the high road, offering mercy to others who had hurt him. My reason to talk about this story came from the realization that as adults, we maybe have not done a very good job of teaching history to our young people—of helping them know there are past events which still influence who we are today. I also wanted to include this story in a class session on how we deal with our differences, not just with the hope that we could see how various people respond to these situations—some in compassionate ways, but also to help our eighth graders know that our lives need to be seen through lenses that are centered on God—lenses some of the world may not use—lenses that bring a different focus to situations. Which brings me to the second of today’s beatitudes.

Honestly, if I could have had a conversation with Jesus about the order of these beatitudes, I’d have recommended this one to come last. To me, it makes a fine summary of all the other ones, including the two Pastor Charles will talk about next week. But Jesus didn’t ask me, so we have what we have. “Blessed are the pure in heart.”

“The Beatitudes truly are a ladder: Who has a chance to be pure in heart? The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful-----the ones who love God and love as God loves. The pure of heart love.” (James Howell)

“This beatitude demands from us some self-examination. Is our service given from selfless motives or from motives of self-display? Is our religion a thing in which we are conscious of nothing so much as a need of God within our hearts, or a thing in which we have comfortable thoughts of our own piety? To examine one’s own motives is a daunting thing, for there are few things in this world that even the best of us do with completely unmixed motives.” (William Barclay)

“You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.” (*The Message*)

When we are focused on God and what God may believe to be the important things, then I think we are closer to understanding this beatitude. “The human predicament is that we let ourselves get frittered away in multiple directions, trying to be and do everything when we were made for just one thing, the one thing that really matters: God.” (James Howell)

“Purity of heart refers to the single-minded devotion to God. Having an ‘undivided heart’ requires that there be something big enough and good enough to merit one’s whole devotion. Faith requires that we be devoted to God with all one’s heart.” (M. Eugene Boring)

“The heart is our truest self. It is the sphere where we meet God or avoid meeting God.” (J. Howell)

“To have a pure heart means that wherever you look, whatever you are looking at, what you see is God.” (Simon Tugwell)

We can see God in the whole created order, all creatures and the gifts of the earth, including human beings. We are all children of God, regardless of race, creed or color, whether we are a Palestinian in a car, a Jewish student down the hall, or a farmer with a hunger family. And when

we recognize God's presence, in this big outside world, then it hopefully changes how we treat the world and each other.

"The legend of the Holy Grail has it that one day Sir Launfal rode off determined to find the Grail, the cup Jesus used at the Last Supper. On his way out of the city, he came upon a beggar who was desperate for a little money so that he might eat. Launfal, knowing what the church expected of him but at the same time filled with derision for this lowly man, sneered at him, looked with contempt, and, while still on his horse, tossed a few gold coins at the beggar's feet. Despite his ravenous hunger, the beggar knew himself to be a human being, loved in the eyes of God. He refused the money. Launfal went on his way, devoting years of his life in the pursuit of the Holy Grail he never found." (Erik Kolbell)

When our motives are confused or mixed, when they are overtaken with personal concerns and desires to succeed, we may be a ways from being pure-hearted. Hank Aaron was asked one day why he went to the plate with the trademark label of the bat facing down. "I don't go up there to read," said Aaron. "I go up there to hit."

Hank knew what he had to do to keep his focus where it needed to be. I'd hope for us, that same kind of clarity, so we could more and more put our focus on God, and how we are participants in God's world, offering mercy whenever we can.

--Sue Burwell