

“Blessed Are the Merciful”

Part Six in a Series on the Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5:7

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer

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Jorge Mario Bergoglio was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in December 1936, the son of an Italian immigrant who had fled the fascist rule of Benito Mussolini. As a boy, Jorge, like most of his contemporaries, grew up with three loves: football (soccer), dancing tango, and traditional milonga music. As a student, he earned money working as a bouncer at a night club. After receiving a diploma in chemical technology, he worked for a time under chemist Dr. Ester Ballestrino.

Young Jorge’s boss’ story deserves a brief tangent from Jorge’s story in light of the fact that two decades later she became a national heroine and martyr. Dr. Ballestrino came to international attention as co-founder of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a group that organized protests by the mothers of missing children kidnapped by the authorities and “disappeared” during the right-wing military dictatorship from 1974 to 1983, a dictatorship that engaged in widespread, state-sponsored terrorism against the Argentinian people by means of “death squads.” In December 1977, Dr. Ballestrino suffered the same fate as her children: she was abducted, tortured, and dropped into the ocean from an airplane. Her body was later recovered, having washed up on the beach, bearing silent witness to the brutality of the corrupt government.

Growing up under the moral influence of such people as Dr. Ballestrino, would it surprise you to learn that young Jorge became a Catholic priest? In fact, he became not only a priest, but a Jesuit, the most scholarly of the monastic orders. Through the years, this remarkable man known for his compassion for the poor, rose through the church to become Archbishop of Buenos Aires, and was made a Cardinal by Pope John Paul II.

In 2013, Jorge burst onto the international scene when he was elected the 266th pope, breaking all sorts of long-standing traditions. He took the papal name of Francis, in honor of St. Francis of Assisi, the first pope to do so. Pope Francis is the first Jesuit to become pope, the first pope to come from the Americas, and the first pope from the Southern Hemisphere.

In addition to his well-known compassion for the poor, his humility, his deep concern for the environment, and his commitment to interfaith dialogue, Pope Francis is perhaps best known for his emphasis on “mercy,” considering it to be the most powerful teaching of Christianity.¹

Mercy is both an attribute of God and a requirement of human beings—as we sang last week in the hymn “What Does the Lord Require of You?” And as the Fifth Beatitude proclaims, mercy is one of the hallmarks of a disciple of Jesus: “Blessed are the merciful.”

But what, exactly, is mercy? The Greek word for mercy, *eleos*, was often used to translate the theologically significant Hebrew word, *hesed*, a term most frequently used to depict God's *steadfast love* or *loving kindness* toward us. Thus, mercy is similar to *compassion*, especially when compassion is shown to an offender. "Mercy is always active: it is *kindness* in action"; it is "*pity* that clothes itself in gracious deeds";² or, as stated in a wonderful 17th-century hymn, mercy is "love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be."³ I really like that line, for it captures the transforming power of mercy: "love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be."

What a powerful concept! I think, however, that we only come to understand the depths of the word "mercy" when we find ourselves in a situation when we really, really need mercy. That is, when we find ourselves in the role of the offender. Only in that situation, when we are the recipients of mercy—whether that mercy is given by God or by a fellow human being—only then do we understand its gracious and transforming character.

Yes, mercy is a beautiful concept, but if we're honest, mercy can also be hard: hard to accept and hard to bestow. Let's examine both spiritual difficulties.

First, mercy can be hard to accept because, as Franciscan priest Richard Rohr put it,

We . . . clutch at our sins and beat ourselves instead of surrendering to the divine mercy. That refusal to be forgiven is a form of pride. It is saying, "I'm better than mercy. I'm only going to accept it when I'm worthy and can preserve my so-called self-esteem." Only the humble person, the little one [that is, the person who becomes like a child], can live in and after mercy.⁴

I think Rohr is correct. It is humbling to be the recipient of mercy—whether divinely or humanly given—because we must acknowledge our need of mercy, our need of forgiveness. And yet this the heart of the Christian faith. God, in overwhelming mercy and love, has forgiven us and accepted us. And in that divine acceptance we can come to understand ourselves as truly forgiven and accepted. That's good news, but wait! The news gets even better. Mercy has not only *forgiving* power; it also has *transforming* power. Mercy changes us so that we are no longer offenders. "Love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be." And that brings us to the second spiritual difficulty with respect to mercy.

Mercy can be hard to bestow. Writing in his role as a wise spiritual director, Rohr asked us to

Look at the times when you have withheld forgiveness. It's always your final attempt to hold a claim over the one you won't forgive. It's the way we finally hold onto power, to seek the moral high ground over another person. "I will hold you in unforgiveness, and you're going to know it just by my coldness, by my not looking over there, by my refusal to smile, or whatever." Oh, we do it subtly to maintain our sense of superiority. Non-

forgiveness is a form of power over another person, a way to manipulate, shame, control and diminish [a person who has wronged you].⁵

Fortunately for us, God refuses to exercise this negative power. Instead, God freely bestows mercy upon us, unendingly and unconditionally. That's good news, but wait! The news gets even better. Mercy has not only *forgiving* power; it also has *transforming* power. It is by receiving mercy—from God and from others—that we are transformed into merciful people. “Love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be.” The experience of having received mercy empowers us to show mercy to others. “Blessed are the merciful.”

As with all the other Beatitudes, the Fifth Beatitude ends with a promise. In this case, the promise is: “for they shall receive mercy.” A word of caution is in order as we examine it. The promise cannot be understood in a tit for tat manner, as if by showing mercy we earn mercy. Such a notion would violate the very logic of the word. Mercy cannot be earned or deserved for the simple fact that mercy is compassion or kindness shown to someone who is undeserving of that compassion or kindness. How, then, are we to understand the promise?

I think Shakespeare was on the right track when he wrote:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.⁶

“‘Twice blest.’ The merciful are too aware of their own sins to deal with others in sharp condemnation. So they draw down on themselves in penitence the mercies of God. Being merciful they arouse no harsh feelings among their neighbors, and are not likely to awaken enmities: they receive as they give.”⁷ The merciful are indeed twice blest.

And that's today's good news. Amen

¹ For a thoughtful reflection on Pope Francis' focus on mercy, see Patricia Adams Farmer, “The Pope's Favorite Verb,” in *Fat Soul: A Philosophy of S-I-Z-E* (Shiprock Press, 2016).

² A. M. Hunter, *Design for Life: An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, Its Making, Its Meaning and Its Meaning* (SCM Press, 1953) 38.

³ “My Song Is Love Unknown,” words by Samuel Crossman (1664) and music by John Ireland (1924).

⁴ Richard Rohr with John Feister, *Jesus' Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 1996) 137.

⁵ Rohr 137.

⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene 1.

⁷ “Matthew,” in *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol 7 (Abingdon Press, 1959) 284-85.