
Mercy and the Illusion of Control

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Lauren Holder
The Second Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 5, Year A

Jesus says: Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'

Jesus, a person who understands sacrifice better than any one of us ever will, tells us to learn what it means to desire mercy over and above sacrifice.

If I'm honest, I think it's easier to understand sacrifice than it is to understand mercy. It's maybe even easier to embrace sacrifice than it is to embrace mercy. Why is that when mercy clearly sounds more desirable in the first place? Because sacrifice is within my control. And I love control.

Perhaps I'm hoping for an early bedtime, but then one of my kids comes down with a stomach bug. I will sacrifice my need for sleep, not just because I love my child, but also because it gives me a sense of control—I *can manage this situation*—over something totally out of my control—the *virus attacking my child's body*.

Or it could be something more trivial. Perhaps I want a chocolate croissant while shopping at the Farmers Market on Saturday, but choose instead to eat a hard-boiled egg at home to curb my craving while buying produce. I will sacrifice my desire for the flakiness of a pastry only butter can create for the sake of my health, but also because it gives me a sense of control—I *can choose healthy foods*—over something totally out of my control—*my aging and changing body*.

Sacrifice is something I can choose. It gives me the illusion of control.

Mercy, on the other hand, will not bend to my will. Mercy is not something I can earn or achieve. My only choice is whether to receive it. And when I extend mercy to another? Once granted, I have no control over how the other will respond. I may choose to offer mercy, yes, but the moment I offer it I let go of control.

Jesus desires mercy over sacrifice, and Jesus tells us to go and learn what that means. It's as if Jesus knows mercy takes time to comprehend, embrace, and extend. It takes time and practice. It's the spiritual practice of letting go of control.

Some of you know that the Living Faith Sunday school class has taken up the spiritual practices of the Twelve Steps the past two months. We started the class with a plan to cover two steps each week, and then found the conversation to be so rich and the learning to so meaningful that we had to slow it down to one step each week.

Our class covers Step 10 today, which says: We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it. In other words: we practice asking for and receiving *mercy*, again and again and again.

You see when Jesus says: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' I take that to mean that mercy is what Jesus wants *from* us. Does Jesus want mercy for us? Of course. I can't even count the number of times God is described as merciful in the Bible.

But Jesus also wants us to learn how to be merciful. If we are to love one another as Christ loves us, then we have to have mercy for one another as Christ has mercy on us. Another way of translating that word "mercy" is "compassion." We have to show compassion for one another as Christ has compassion for us.

Mercy and compassion take practice. And I think the practice of *giving* mercy and compassion begins with the practice of *receiving* mercy and compassion. I think we can't give what we can't receive. And that is the beauty of Step 10. That is the beauty of paying attention to our mistakes and admitting when we get it wrong. It is a daily exercise in receiving mercy so that we might share that same mercy with others and point to Christ's presence among us.

It's impossible to receive mercy if we cannot admit our need for it. And it's impossible to grant mercy if we have not allowed ourselves to be transformed by the receiving of it.

I love Ted Lasso. And I don't even like to watch TV. But when my mom and my best friend insisted I watch it, I heeded their advice.

The first season of the show was my saving grace during COVID. I was in the midst of a situation I had absolutely no control over—we all were. I remember telling my therapist that no matter what I did, I was going to disappoint people, and the fear of inevitable failure was making it hard for me to find hope.

My therapist responded: What if your only goal was to show up every day with your integrity—could you do that? And I realized I could. I couldn't control how others would respond... I couldn't guarantee that things would get better... but I could show up in the truth of who God created me to be.

And that's what I saw Ted Lasso do in that first season again, and again, and again. He didn't fit in, he made mistakes, he disappointed people's expectations, he fell short so many times. And yet he kept showing up, exactly as the person God created him to be.

And the more he showed up as his true self, the more others around him began to show their true colors too. The whole team, and then the whole town, was transformed by this one person's willingness to show up in their truth, even when that truth meant admitting defeat and asking for mercy.

In the final season, a character who betrayed Ted and the whole team is shown mercy. Well, he is shown mercy by all but one person, Beard, who loves Ted so much that he cannot forgive the man who turned his back on him. That is until Ted says something like, "Aren't you glad none of us is defined by our worst mistake?" That line reminds Beard of his worst mistake—one that landed him in prison. And it reminds Beard of how Ted had mercy on him when he was at his worst. Because Beard had received mercy, he is finally able to grant it.

We can't control mercy. We can't earn it, we can't achieve it, we can only receive it or give it away. Jesus desires mercy from us. And this will take some practice. But we can all begin again every day by paying attention to what we do and what we say, and admitting when we make mistakes. We can ask for mercy. And the more we practice this, the more mercy and compassion we will have to share with others, and the more mercy and compassion we'll grant even to ourselves.

Because control is an illusion. But love is real. And the compassion and mercy that love extends will change the world.

Amen.