

Love Mercy: Sunday, 1/12/20

1 Mercy is one of those topics that can't be left to a dictionary definition- it has to be felt, viscerally, on your insides. So pay attention to your feelings as you hear this story from Brennan Manning's classic, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*.¹

A story is told about Fiorello LaGuardia, who when he was mayor of New York City during the worst days of the Great Depression and all of World War II, was called by adoring New Yorkers 'the Little Flower' because he was only five foot four and always wore a carnation on his lapel. He was a colorful character who used to ride the NYC fire trucks, raid speakeasies with the police department, take entire orphanages to baseball games, and whenever the New York newspapers were on strike, he would go on the radio and read the Sunday funnies to the kids.

One bitterly cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself. Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges. "It's a bad neighborhood, your Honor," the man told the mayor. "She's got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson."

La Guardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said, "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions – ten dollars or ten days in jail." But even as he pronounced his sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it into his famous sombrero, saying, "Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore, I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant."

So the following day the NYC newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered old lady who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren, fifty

¹ Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (2005, Multnomah Books). Cited in <https://www.newlife-ct.org/the-newlife-blog/post/a-story-of-grace-and-mercy>

cents of that amount being contributed by the red-faced grocery store owner, while some seventy petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and NYC policemen, each of whom had just paid fifty cents for the privilege of doing so, gave the mayor a standing ovation.

2 So how did that make you feel? Were you surprised? Amused? Scandalized? All three? I hope you also felt your heart warmed by hearing that story of mercy, because it's a great example of what the Old Testament writers called in Hebrew, "Hesed". If you read this word in a variety of English translations, you'll see words used like kindness, mercy, love, loyalty, and faithfulness. That's because Hesed is a very complicated idea that attempts to capture the essence of God's character as a loving God. I actually prefer the term "loving kindness," because I think it gets to the essence of who God is and who God wants us to be. It's a great description of LaGuardia's act of mercy to the grandmother-turned-thief. Because of the shocking, scandalous love that God has shown us in sending Jesus, God wants us to treat each other in the same extravagant ways. Micah 6 puts us on notice that God isn't fooled or amused when we shine up our shoes for Sunday worship and then spend the rest of our week spreading unlove and ungrace.

3 Our next story of mercy comes directly from the Gospel of Matthew. Just like the previous story, I want you to pay attention to how this story makes you feel, and I'm going to ask you about that afterwards. I'm reading from the 18th chapter, starting with verse 21 in the New Living Translation. **{Read Matthew 18:21-35, NLT}**

Most of you have heard this story, so I suppose you probably weren't shocked by it. Were you at least a little indignant that the servant who received mercy from his master was not merciful to his fellow servant? Or perhaps, like me, you felt a little convicted when you heard this story, all too aware of the times you've been unmerciful toward others. I want you to weigh those feelings now. Take that warm-hearted feeling of grace from the first story and put it in your left hand. Now take the feelings of indignation or conviction from this last story and put them in your right hand. Which one's heavier? For me, it's the right hand holding the guilt of my stubborn and selfish refusal to share God's mercy with others that's heaviest. It weighs me down in guilt and fuels my fear of God's judgment. I can tell you with 100% certainty that Jesus didn't die so that we'd go on wallowing in our guilt and the debts we owe to God and others.

So take what's in that right hand, and let it go. Because it's the glory of God's mercy that we're called to live in, not the darkness of guilt and judgment. Somehow, we need to make that experience of mercy that we hold in the left hand to be our guiding light, our motive power. Unlike the servant in the story, we need to let go of our debts and focus on what really matters. We need to continually go back to those moments when we've experienced the richness of God's grace, the experiences that have revealed to us yet another facet of the depth and breadth of God's loving kindness. It's not our own virtue or maturity that forms us into people of mercy. It's a profound acceptance and embrace of God's loving kindness toward us.

4 Those of you over 50 will recognize this as a scene from Charlton Heston's performance as Moses in Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 epic film, *The Ten Commandments*. This is one of the most memorable scenes from the film, as God parts the Red Sea and delivers God's people from their Egyptian captors in what the Bible refers to as the Exodus. It's in Exodus that we read these verses in which God announces his unimpeachable character to a clueless Moses: "Yahweh! The LORD! The God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness. I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations. I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But I do not excuse the guilty."²

Don't ever let someone get away with saying that the God portrayed in the Old Testament is all about punishment and that it wasn't until Jesus came that God's character was revealed to be love. God's loving kindness is stamped all over the Bible, from the very beginning of creation, to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and all the way to the end of John's Revelation, where we see an image of God's loving kindness ultimately fulfilled in the recreation of the heavens and the earth.

By the way, did you catch that last part of God's speech to Moses? God does not excuse the guilty. That seems like a sobering footnote, but it's important. God is a God of justice, and justice requires the law to be fulfilled. Think back to that first story of Fiorello LaGuardia. Did he excuse the woman's theft? No. He established her guilt and then pronounced a sentence, satisfying justice. But his loving kindness didn't leave her there.

² Exodus 34:6-7. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

Instead, in a stunning Christ-like action, he paid the price of her crime himself, reaching into his own billfold, and then he used his authority to marshal the gathered community in the courtroom to lavish her further with undeserved riches- almost fifty dollars, which would have been a significant sum of money in the midst of the Great Depression. That's the way it is with God's loving kindness toward us as well, and that's why God expects us to not only love mercy, but to show mercy to others. We can't do that without first being filled with God's loving kindness. It's an uphill grind to try to show loving kindness to others if you're not continually going back to the well, the source of all mercy, remembering the stories of God's love in the Bible and the experiences of God's love in your lifetime.

5 When Jesus said that he didn't come to abolish the law, he meant in part that there's still plenty for us to learn from prophets like Micah. I hope you'll take the Micah challenge this month to Love Mercy, Walk Humbly, and Do Justice. You'll find more of the action cards I gave the kids this morning on the welcome table in the lobby. Who knows? As you step out in faithfulness, you just might find that God's Spirit is fanning the flames of your heart, urging you on to new adventures in mercy, humble living, and justice.

I've mentioned before how much admiration I have for Pope Francis, who several years ago proclaimed a year of jubilee that was to be focused on extending the grace of God's mercy to everyone. For Jesus followers, every day can be a day of jubilee, a day of filling our hearts with the undeserved loving kindness of God and then emptying them out again in loving kindness to our family, neighbors, coworkers, and yes, even strangers. Got mercy? Then give mercy. Not giving mercy? Then perhaps it's time to spend some more time before God's throne, because you can't give what you haven't received, and there's no substitute for the grace of God overflowing from your heart.



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