

“The practice of gratitude”, a sermon based on Luke 17:11 – 19, preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 9 October 2017 by Kerry Enright.

Luke suggests we live by mercy, the mercy of others and of God.

Luke suggests Jesus awakens us to that mercy and turns awareness to gratitude.

Luke suggests that gratitude is good, and that giving thanks gives life.

And it happens especially when we feel in between.

There were ten people who suffered from leprosy. One of them was a Samaritan. The other nine were Jewish. Luke locates them in between, between Samaria and Galilee. None of them were at home. None of them were in a settled place. None of them were in a region where they had status or authority or acceptance. None of them were in a place where they instinctively knew how to behave in order to be included.

The geographical location reflected their status in the community. They suffered from leprosy and so were outside. They didn't belong. They didn't count. They weren't normal. They had to keep at a distance.

In such a place, they could acknowledge their need, not just to be healed, but to be included, to be valued. And it had to come from outside, from someone else. Mercy.

When we are confident that we know what to do and how to do it, when all is settled and our behaviour is predetermined, and we just keep doing what we have done, and behaving as we have behaved, when we imagine we have everything, we do not need mercy. We cry out for mercy when we need something from someone else, when we sense a need. Mercy is something only someone else can give.

“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.”

The cry for mercy comes from our incompleteness, our need, our difficulty, our failing, our mistakes, our fragility.

The cry for mercy is what opens us to the gift of the other. As long as we think we have all we need, that we are all we are meant to be, that there is nothing

more to receive, that we can achieve everything on our own, we will not cry out for mercy.

“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.”

As you know, I am working with the Cromwell parish as interim moderator. The Session and Managers of Cromwell are praying for us here at Knox, that we would be able to reach into the community with the good news of Jesus Christ, because we need mercy to do it, we need the help of others, we cannot do it alone.

And last Wednesday night, students from the Combined Christian Groups came to Knox and prayed for us, prayed for Knox, that we would be able to reach into the city with the good news of Jesus Christ, because we need mercy to do it, we need the help of others, we cannot do it alone.

The encouragement of others can come when we voice our need for mercy, for the help of others, for the wisdom and guidance and encouragement and gifts of others.

Mercy and humility and gratitude belong together.

“A heart trained always to be grateful will also grow more and more humble; it will be fearless in its recognition of how everything it loves, needs, and celebrates streams in a never-ending river of grace from God.” -Andrew Harvey; The Direct Path

“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.”

“Go and show yourselves to the priests,” Jesus said.

And it was on the way that they were healed.

They needed the blessing of the priest in order to be welcomed back into the community, to be accepted and valued and included.

So nine of them, headed for the priests with determination. The final step in the journey of acceptance, for nine of them.

And one of them, the Samaritan, did not fit. He would never be included because a priest would never bless him because he was a Samaritan.

He was free from that determined journey, that set path. He was free of those settled steps.

He was free because mercy was not assured. Mercy was not predetermined, as it was for the nine. Mercy was still an open question – would he receive what he most needed?

And so he was free to turn back. He prostrated himself at Jesus feet and thanked him.

Prostrated himself. It is a stark bodily action. To lie face down, the whole body on the ground, head down, completely given, bodily devoted.

He isn't looking around to wonder how people might react to this expression of gratitude, to this outpouring of praise, to this love.

Mercy, freedom, gratitude, freely expressed, involving the whole of his body.

R.S. Thomas

Life is not hurrying on to a receding future,

Nor hankering after an imagined past.

It is turning aside like Moses

To the miracle of a lit bush,

To a brightness that seemed as transitory as your youth once,

But is the eternity that awaits you.

Gratitude turns us back to what gives life, to what gives mercy, to give it a second thought, a second look, and thereby to open ourselves to its gift again.

The Samaritan received mercy again by going back and giving thanks to the source of mercy

The practice of gratitude opens a moment of our life to the gift of that moment, the grace of that moment, the possibilities of that moment.

John Milton said, "Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world."

Dorothy Soelle retells an old French legend about a storyteller who gives up his fickle life and enters a monastery. But the life of the monks remains strange to him; he knows neither how to recite nor chant a prayer. He pours out his lament to the Virgin Mary and she tells him to serve God with what he can do, namely to dance and leap. From that moment on, he skips the divine offices and dances during those times. He is called to the abbot and believes that he is about to be expelled. But the abbot only says, "With your dancing you have glorified God with body and soul. But may God forgive us all those lofty words that pass our lips without coming from the heart."

Today we begin our Christian Giving programme that will run for a month and end with a service of celebration mid- November.

Christian giving comes from sensing mercy, from sensing how much we receive from others and from God. It is a way we thank God.

In a moment we will celebrate the sacrament of baptism. If baptism is anything, it is a sign we live by mercy, for the whole of our lives. Through his parents, and wider family, and the Christian family, Isaac will gain a sense of that mercy and learn to live grateful for it.

Mercy, humility, gratitude. From this springs joy.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

growing in courage to live the Jesus way



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