

Blessed Are the Merciful

Matthew 5:7

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In 1943, 21-year-old Charlie Brown was flying his first mission over Nazi Germany. He was part of a 500-bomber formation headed to bomb an airplane factory in Bremen, Germany. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRKQvmT3Xhs>)

During the raid, Brown's bomber was nearly destroyed by ground fire. The bomber's nose was blown away. She lost two engines, eight guns, and most of her communications. The crew managed to release the bombs but Brown was unable to stay in formation as he flew back to England. (Ibid)

That's when the German Luftwaffe showed up and shot the rest of the plane to pieces. The bomber lost most of her tail. Three of Brown's crew were badly wounded and the tail gunner was killed. (Ibid)

The plane became inverted and nearly crashed before Brown brought it under control and leveled it off at 2000 feet. (Ibid)

The bomber flew over a German air base where Franz Stigler was enjoying a cigarette. When he saw the wounded plane flying so low, he knew it would be an easy kill which would give him enough to earn The Knight's Cross, Germany's highest award for valor. (<http://i2.cdn.cnn.com/cnnnext/dam/assets/130307160303-young-franz-story-top.jpg>)

He climbed into his Messerschmitt fighter and quickly caught up with the American bomber. However, he was surprised that he didn't take any fire from the bomber as he approached. (Ibid)

He'd never seen a bomber so mangled and still able to fly. He pulled within three feet of the limping plane and he peered inside. He could see the tail gunner who lay dead and he could see the others in the plane who were wounded. Then he made eye contact with the pilot. (Ibid)

Up until that point, for Stigler, the plane was just an American plane that needed to be finished off. After he saw the people inside and how helpless they were to defend themselves, he could not shoot. The rosary beads he felt between his fingers connected to something inside his heart. (Ibid)

Inside the American B-17 bomber, Charlie Brown could hardly believe what was happening. Instead of being shot out of the sky by a Nazi pilot doing his job, he received an escort all the way to the North Sea and then the pilot gave him a salute before peeling off and heading back to base. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRKQvmT3Xhs>)

Charlie Brown and his crew were able to make it back to England. (Ibid)

Franz Stigler could not tell his story or he would have been executed. The United States would not tell Charlie Brown's story because the words "mercy" and "Nazi" were not words that could coexist in the American lexicon. Who would believe that a Nazi could show mercy? (<http://www.cnn.com/2013/03/09/living/higher-call-military-chivalry/>)

So, the story stayed untold for 40 years until Franz Stigler's story was printed in Canada, where he'd moved, and Charlie Brown discovered it. After discovering one another, these two men became very close friends until they died within months of one another in 2008. (Ibid)

After Charlie Brown's death, a researcher was browsing his library and he found a book on German fighter jets given to him by Franz Stigler. (Ibid)

On the inside, Stigler had inscribed these words:
In 1940, I lost my only brother as a night fighter. On the 20th of December, 4 days before Christmas, I had the chance to save a B-17 from her destruction, a plane so badly damaged it was a wonder that she was still flying. (Ibid)

The pilot, Charlie Brown, is for me, as precious as my brother was. Thanks Charlie. Your Brother, Franz (Ibid)

The story of Charlie Brown and Franz Stigler is a Good Samaritan story from World War II. It is a story of mercy. It developed into a story of mutual respect and brotherhood of people who were once enemies.

We can tell it now because we are so far removed from those difficult days that it does not bother us as much to hear a story about a Nazi who had mercy, but imagine if I were telling you a story of an Isis soldier who showed mercy to an American soldier.

Would it have the same feel-good appeal? Probably not. We don't like stories where the enemy shows mercy because we want to feel justified in our hatred for our enemy, for our discrimination, for our prejudices, for our preconceived ideas about who people are and the values they espouse.

This was the reason Jesus' story of the Samaritan who helped a wounded Jewish man was equally hard for the Jewish people to hear. They had never thought about a Samaritan showing mercy, nor had they given enough thought to the mercy they should be showing foreigners themselves.

Why can't Jesus just let us have enemies? It's easier that way: Samaritans and Jews, cowboys and Indians, Hatfields and McCoys, us and whomever we choose to stereotype or hate.

Jesus can't let us live that way because the nature of God is not that way.

From the time humanity turned away from God, God had mercy. Instead of immediate death, God had mercy on Adam and Eve. He made coverings for their bodies from the skin of an animal to cover their shame and he cast them from the garden.

Throughout the Old Testament, God maintained his covenant with Israel. Even though Israel broke their part of the covenant, God showed mercy. His mercy was a giving kind of love, a love more powerful than betrayal, a grace stronger than sin. (<http://www.thedivinemercy.org/news/What-Does-Divine-Mercy-Actually-Mean-2985>)

From Isaiah the Prophet we read: "For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love [pronounced "hesed"] shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord who has compassion on you"(Is 54:10).

Israel did nothing to deserve God's "hesed" love. God's love to Israel is entirely based on his mercy. It is the dominating motive that appears in his deeds, and the motive that binds up all of His dealings with humanity.

"America First" might excite us politically, but please understand that God has commanded us to put Him first and His commandments first.

The reason God cannot accept our marginalization of people groups, nations, and ethnic groups, is that it is contrary to God's nature. God is a God of mercy. If we worship a God of mercy, God expects something of His nature to settle in our hearts.

God expects us to transfer some of the oil that we have been anointed with onto those who are suffering, marginalized, and broken.

The very nature of mercy is to extend love to those who do not deserve it. If we wait to show love to people who earn it, deserve it, or ask for it, then the circle of people that we love will be very small and the love we share with them will not even be hesed love, the merciful love of God.

Later in this Sermon on the Mount Jesus asked, "If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (NRS) Matthew 5:46-47

"In the New Testament, the Greek word that is usually translated as mercy is the word "eleos." It can also be translated as loving kindness or tender compassion. The Greek word comes from a root word meaning "oil that is poured out."

This is vividly demonstrated in Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan as he bandages the wounds of the injured man lying in the ditch and pours in oil and wine to help bring healing to his wounds.

When the early church put together worship liturgy, it used the Greek words Kyrie Eleison, which means "Lord, have mercy," and Christe Eleison, which means "Christ have mercy." (Click here to hear Kyrie Eleison chants: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6oM1iLJH6k>)

Gregorian chants used these words and they would be sung over and over to express the heart-felt prayers of the people, acknowledging that without mercy, without God pouring His love into our lives, we are doomed.

John's gospel says that during Jesus' crucifixion the Jews did not want the bodies of Jesus and the two thieves left on the cross during the Sabbath so they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed.

"33 But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. 34 Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out." (John 19)

"According to the ancient Fathers of the Church, the Church was born from the wounded side of Christ, when out of His heart there poured out blood and water, symbolic of all the graces of the two chief sacraments, baptism and the Eucharist." (Ibid)

The reason? In his death, Jesus took all of our sins upon himself. His death was an act of mercy for our sakes.

That is the meaning of John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son." His death was for us, so that through him our sins could be forgiven.

Mercy is the greatest attribute of God. Mercy is the most amazing part of the story of Jesus. Even from the cross Jesus asked God to have mercy on those who were crucifying him. "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34 NRSV)

So, what God wants is for each of us to come to understand the mercy He has available for your life. If you have felt and received the mercy of God for your life, then God wants you to show that mercy to others. Be a reflection of the One you proclaim to love and worship.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." Matthew 5:7

Franz Stigler said when he looked inside the bomber and he saw the dead and the wounded and how helpless they were, he knew he could not shoot them down.

The merciful are those who look past the policies; they look past the rules; they look past the bureaucracies; they look past legalistic religion; they look past politics; they look past color; they look past education; they look past mistakes; and they see a person, a human being, and when we see a human being, when we see a face and know a name, that makes a difference.

In 1995 I stood and I saw the United Nations Refugee Camp on the campus of Ricks Institute. There were 25,000 refugees there and I turned and walked away. It was repulsive and sickening, but I didn't know anyone there, but it was easy to walk away.

However, when I received a letter in 1996 from Henry Peabody who was in the Buduburam Refugee Camp in Ghana asking for help, suddenly things changed. I knew Henry. I had met him. I could see his face.

Then it became more personal and I had to decide whether I'd be like those who passed by on the other side, or if I would become involved and help him. I chose to help.

What choice will you make when God places someone in your path that's different from you? Will you show mercy?

Our roads are all filled with these kinds of choices. Which decision will you make this week as God places someone before you. When you come face to face with that person remember the words of Jesus, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. (Matthew 25:40)

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