

The Quality of Mercy  
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost  
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Phone numbers of childhood friends, 1980s commercial jingles, state capitals, French prepositions, but only because they're set to a song. This is just a glimpse at the things I've intentionally or unintentionally memorized over the years. The Lord's Prayer, the prologue to The Canterbury Tales. I bet you have your own list. Some of the intentional pieces were my own choices, like Emily Dickinson's poem about hope and its feathers. Quite a few were chosen for me by, I'm sure, well-meaning teachers - like those French prepositions and that prologue. Here's one: "The quality of mercy is not strained;/ It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven./ Upon the place beneath." These lines are spoken by Shakespeare's Portia in The Merchant of Venice; she's incognito and is arguing that mercy be bestowed upon her love. It's a complicated play, not least because of its anti-Jewish themes. Yet, when I was charged with memorizing her speech - which goes on a bit more, what stuck was the imagery of mercy falling like a soft shower of rain on a dry and thirsty landscape.

"The quality of mercy is not strained;/ It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven./ Upon the place beneath." Maybe it's the sight of the stranded barges and newly revealed sandbars from our low river, but again and again, I latched onto "O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before ... Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit." And still more, "you visit the earth and water it abundantly; you make it very plenteous; the river of God is full of water ... You drench the furrows and smooth out the ridges; with heavy rain you soften the ground and bless its increase." It is not strained, not constrained, not stingy. God's rain, God's mercy in Joel and in the Psalms is indiscriminate. "The quality of mercy is not strained;/ It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven./ Upon the place beneath."

For some reason, or probably for many reasons, this is hard for us to believe: that mercy just falls. We live in a dry world, and I'm not talking about the weather now. We live in a world with carefully measured mercy, as if it's a scarce resource. We ration it, deciding who and how much. We've decided mercy is something only some deserve, and then often still begrudgingly. We're not just parsimonious with others and those who have done us wrong, but even towards ourselves with our unmerciful internal dialogues and self-contempt.

It's such a difficult pill to swallow, this idea that mercy is rampant and plentiful. It's so counter-intuitive that even the way we read the parables of Jesus who came to demonstrate radical forgiveness and lavish compassion gets contorted. "God, I thank you that I'm not like this Pharisee" is a hot-take that would be easy to make this morning. The Pharisee and the tax collector - such as they are, are both in the temple offering their prayers - such as they are, and we're supposed to figure out who is justified and who is not. With complicating anti-Jewish messages, not unlike The Merchant of Venice, both subtle and not so subtle, the caricatured Pharisee becomes an easy punching bag. But parables are not supposed to be easy; they are supposed to challenge us.

Amy-Jill Levine (my parable scholar go-to and long-time theological crush) makes a provocative suggestion that we've got a translation problem in this story. Since I memorized French prepositions by song and not Greek prepositions, I rely on her scholarship and others who know all the ways to read the word *para* - as in paradox or parallel. And so she suggests that we could read the punch line, "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified *rather than* the other" as, "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified *alongside* the other" or even, "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified *because of* the other." It could just be that they all went down to their homes in grace and righteousness.

What if Jesus was trying to tell anyone with ears to hear that everyone gets mercy, whether we pray right or not, whether we are contempt-full or contemptible? "The quality of mercy is not strained;/ It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven./ Upon the place beneath." What if Jesus was reminding his listeners of a deeply held Jewish value: that our salvation, our justification was not, was never meant to be an individual pursuit, but was always bound up in community with everyone else and even in relationship with the whole creation? From the very beginning the answer to the question, "am I my brother's keeper" is a resounding yes. And not just our two-legged, opposable-thumbed brothers and sisters, but all of creation because our prayers and our choices ripple out to every sparrow and stream and bit of wilderness. "You drench the furrows and smooth out the ridges; with heavy rain you soften the ground and bless its increase." "The quality of mercy is not strained;/ It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven./ Upon the place beneath."

Elsewhere we are reminded that "the rain falls on the just and the unjust." Levine proposes that it might be that the whole faithful enterprise is much more like a middle school group project than we'd like to admit. This means that whether you're the dutiful worker bee, or the one who designs the poster and brings the snacks, or the one who napped while everyone else worked, the whole group gets the same grade. We are bound up together with everyone else here at 102 N. Second and at 201 Poplar. We are entangled with the low river and the newly seen images of faraway galaxies. We are just as responsible for the way we look at others as we are for the way we look at ourselves in the mirror. This is hard for us, but it's not hard for God who rains down mercy and love and forgiveness and grace with ridiculous, even absurd abundance on everyone and everything.

The point of the story can't be "thank God I'm not like that Pharisee." That's a little too neat and easy, and if that's our takeaway, then we've just landed in the same contemptible trap. But even when we do land there with all our human hard-heartedness, even then we get showered by God's love. Even when we are stingy in showing mercy to our fellow travelers and to ourselves, God loves us with our small imaginations. God's mercy doesn't get portioned out in teaspoons, and it doesn't pick and choose its beneficiaries against a careful checklist of deserving qualities. Everyone in the temple is doing the best they can; frankly, everyone outside the temple is too. They all go down to their homes in grace. And so also your sons and daughters, the old men, the young men, the male and female slaves, the threshing floors, the vats, all flesh, the mountains, the waves, those who dwell at the ends of the earth, the furrows, the ridges, the year, the fields of wilderness, hills, meadows, valleys, tax collectors and Pharisees, the contemptible villains, and the contempt-full, self-righteous judges, and me and you.

"The quality of mercy is not strained;/ It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven./ Upon the place beneath." It was a good bit my English teacher made me learn by heart, now would be a good time to take it to heart. Now would be a good time to let God's mercy wash over us, and everyone around us, and the whole blamed and beautiful world.