



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

September 3, 2017

"Bring Heaven Down" (How to Pray Series) Luke 10:25-37

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This summer, I spent 37 days with a couple of short-term mission teams from our church. I was in Rwanda and Swaziland with two incredible groups of people and I attended a remarkable outreach to youth in Scotland called "Soul Survivor". I'll tell you more about that part of the trip in a moment. It was an amazing experience for me to be in Africa with people from our church, discovering how God is using His people all around the world to show His love and compassion.

Once again, Jesus enrolled me in His "disruptive school of discipleship". Our teachers were the women and men of Africa, our sisters and brothers in Christ, who helped us again see how God is bringing heaven down to this earth. They showed me that our God is a God of boundless mercy. And that's what I want to talk about this morning. As we continue this series of sermons on learning how to pray, I want to think together about our God who is a God of mercy. And we're going to do that by looking at one of Jesus' most familiar stories.

In Rwanda, after working with our friends with the Anglican Church in Musanze, we took a break one day to visit Akagera National Park. We had the incredible opportunity to go on a game drive. Let me show you just one of the animals we saw up

close. I shot this video with my iPhone. This is exactly what it looked and sounded like. **(Giraffe video is shown)**. Isn't that incredible?! Okay, only half of what I just said is true. I did record that video on my phone. The soundtrack was only in my head. I think giraffes show us that we have a whimsical God who is endlessly creative.

There was another lasting memory from our day in Akagera National Park. I don't think I will ever forget this. **(Photo of horse-fly is shown)**. I was eaten alive by these horrible creatures. I can't believe that guy is letting that carnivorous, biting machine sit on his finger! I also have no idea what this repugnant creature tells us about our God. Have you ever been bitten by a horsefly? It hurts! It really hurts! And I was bitten by these maddening creatures at least 25 times. Maybe more! They landed on my neck. They bit through my shirt. Bug spray didn't slow them down that much. Just looking at a picture of that tormenting insect makes my skin itch. By the time I got to Swaziland to spend time with the high school students from our church, I was already working my way through my first tube of Benadryl.

On my flights to Swaziland, I discovered something about my fellow human beings. It began to dawn on me during my flight from

Kigali, Rwanda to Johannesburg, South Africa that some people get a little uneasy watching a person they don't know apply an unknown ointment for an unknown reason to their skin—while they're sitting next to that person with the fasten seatbelt sign on. I tried to do it as discreetly as possible, but I had so many bites it was like I was applying sunscreen before going to the beach. At one point, I was aware of the person to my left eyeing me out of the corner of their eye and tucking their arm in just a little bit.

I get it. I'd be asking myself some questions if I was sitting next to someone who was performing first aid on themselves. What are you doing? Why are you doing that here? Is what you have contagious? How did you get that tube of cream on this airplane? Maybe, I should change my seat. Those are some of the questions I'd be asking myself if I had been sitting next to me!

I think some of the people in this story that Jesus tells had a set of similar questions. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, a couple of people who came upon a man who had been beaten up and was lying on the side of the road, did the equivalent of pushing the flight attendant call button and changing their seats.

But there was one guy who saw the same man lying on the side of the road who stopped and essentially said, "Here, let me see that tube of unknown ointment and I'll apply it to all those spots you can't reach."

Turn with me to Luke chapter 10 and we're going to start reading in verse 25.

This story is a parable about mercy. Father Philip Chircop, who led an amazing workshop at HIM this past March, defined mercy this way, "Mercy is the capacity to enter the chaos of another person. Mercy is also the capacity to enter the joy of another. Mercy is the capacity to enter the life of the other. Mercy is receiving something we don't deserve. Mercy is a preemptive strike of love. Mercy is the art of getting under another's skin. God, in Jesus, got under the skin of humanity." You see, our God is a God of mercy.

In this passage, Jesus is going to challenge a lawyer to consider living a different kind of life, with a radically different way of looking at the world and living in the world. Jesus is going to challenge this lawyer to live a life of mercy. But the deeper purpose Jesus has in telling this story is to help this man, so obsessed with the legalities of religion, to discover that God is not the hard, exacting, punitive God so many think He is—but a God of boundless mercy.

Jesus is in the middle of a conversation with His disciples when this happens (Luke 10:25-28). *Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* **26** (Jesus) said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" **27** He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,

and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." **28** And (Jesus) said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

So, this lawyer was listening in on what Jesus was saying to His disciples and he decides he's going to give Jesus a little theological exam. So he asks Jesus a question about how a person inherits everlasting life. And Jesus answers the lawyer's question by asking him his own questions. Jesus says to the man, "You tell me? What's written in the scriptures?" The lawyer answers the questions correctly and Jesus says, "Good job! Your answer is theologically correct. Your belief system is right." But Jesus then takes it a step further. He always takes it a step further. He says, "Now show me that you actually believe what you've said you believe, by living it out."

And here's where the lawyer gets himself in a little trouble. Luke 10:29 says, *But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

The lawyer now thinks he has Jesus cornered. "Exactly how broad is your definition of neighbor?" That's what he wants to know. So, Jesus tells him a story.

The Jesuits encourage us to put ourselves into a story like this. So, right now, today, whom do you most identify with in this story? The truth is that we are a little bit of all of the characters in this parable. But who is it that you identify with most in this story? Are you the man lying by the side of the road, beaten up by some bad guys? Are you one of the robbers who devised a trap for an innocent traveler and assaulted him for your own financial gain? Maybe you

feel like the Priest, or the Levite, who pushes the flight attendant call button and ask if there are any seats in business class? Maybe you're the Samaritan, the outsider who is not trusted by the community but is actually the one who understands the heart of God better than some of the religious leaders of his day? Maybe you identify with the Innkeeper, who provides a place where the injured man can heal. Or maybe you're the donkey who carries the wounded man to the place where he can recover. Whom do you identify with most, today?

Here is Jesus' story about mercy in verses 30-37. **30** *Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.*

33 *But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them (maybe a little Benadryl). Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'*

36 *Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" 37 (The lawyer) said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*

I would like to think that lawyer's life began to change that day as he spent those moments with Jesus. I think his heart might have begun to be transformed. One thing I'm discovering is that as I spend time with a merciful God, I am becoming a more merciful person. If my God is angry and judgmental, that's the kind of person I'll become. But if I begin to recognize and accept the truth about God, that He is mercy, and if I spend time with this God in prayer, then I will become a merciful person.

Have you discovered that God is amazingly patient with us? He is steadfast in love, slow to anger. As I have started to understand that, as I put the full weight of my life down on that amazing truth, I can grow in patience with the humanity of others. And my ability to do that is related to my capacity to be patient with my own humanity.

Father Philip Chircop bowled me over when he said in his HIM workshop, "God is never offended by our humanity. If we don't get that right, we're heading for disaster. There is nothing that we can do to get God to love us more or do anything that will get God to love us less. God loves me not because I am good but because God is good."

God is mercy and He wants to help us learn to be merciful to ourselves so that we might grow in our capacity to be merciful to others.

We've seen incredible acts of mercy this past week in Southeast Texas. Thousands of average citizens did not wait for the government to do something to take care of people in danger. They brought their own boats and their monster trucks and crossed flooded roads and bayous to rescue people. For most of those brave citizens, it

didn't matter what race or religion a person was. It didn't matter if they were documented or not. Average citizens just got sick and tired of sitting in front of their television sets watching this catastrophe unfold. They got involved. They passed Jesus' test. They didn't simply have empathetic feelings. They took the risk to do something.

Here's what I'm discovering. If I spend time in prayer with a merciful God, I will start to become a more merciful person. If I view God as angry and judgmental, that's the kind of person I'll become.

The Good Samaritan in Jesus' story tore up his to do list that day, crossed the road, and cared for that man in the street. He didn't just have the correct theology about mercy; he lived a merciful life.

So, how do we practice mercy? It starts when we ask ourselves some tough questions. Are we willing to really see the needs of the people in our lives and in our world and do something about those needs? We need to stop pulling down the blinds. We need to grow in our capacity to be consciously aware of what is going on in the world and how God is at work. The Good Samaritan is a story about seeing differently. Jesus regularly encourages us to look, to behold, to really see the realities facing the people in our lives, in our communities and in the world. What would Jesus see and what would He do?

We can go through life seeing only what we want to see. We can live our lives with selective seeing and hearing. Pray for the grace to be free from selective hearing and seeing.

The Priest and the Levite were probably good people. They probably thought they were obeying the law. They would have been unclean if the man was dead and they touched him. Legalism regularly gets in the way of mercy.

Here's the calculation I think the Priest and the Levite made. "If I stop to help this hurting person, what will happen to me?" The Samaritan asked a different question, "If I don't stop to help this person, what will happen to him?" That is a very different question.

And there are larger questions to be asked as well. Martin Luther King Jr. made this comment about this parable, "On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."

Showing mercy starts by seeing and hearing differently.

After spending about three and a half weeks in Central and Southern Africa with two mission teams from our church, I flew to London on my way up to Scotland to take part in an outreach to Scottish youth called "Soul Survivor". Soul Survivor is led by Mike Pilavachi and Andy Croft, two good friends of our church. Before boarding my British Airways flight to Edinburgh, I sent a text from the airport in London to some friends of mine in the States.

I am still trying to figure out why I sent that text message and why in the world I'm talking about it now in this sermon.

Did I send that text in an attempt to start processing the reverse culture shock I was experiencing as I made my way from Swaziland to Scotland? Was it an attempt on my part to plant a flagstick in the ground to remind me to think and pray about the economic inequities that exist in our world? As silly as this is going to sound, something happened in the airport in London that raised some familiar and troubling questions for me. And that all happened because I was willing to see the realities of the world and asks some questions.

I still find it disorienting to make the journey back to the world I live in when I have been with our sisters and brothers in Christ who are living in resource challenged places. I never want that transition to be easy. I want to be challenged to think deeply about very important global realities. That, I think, is the main reason I made this one very small observation to a couple of friends of mine in a text message.

If you've ever been in Heathrow Terminal 5 in London, you'll know that it is a massive, gleaming place. It has great restaurants, high-end shops and all the conveniences anyone could want while waiting to board a flight. The reverse culture shock I experienced upon my arrival in London from Africa was really nothing new. I might not have even noticed this had I not just spent about 25 days in Rwanda and Swaziland.

When I walked into the men's room in Terminal 5, this is what I

heard. (Song, "Sheep May Safely Graze", is played).

That's one of Johann Sebastian Bach's most exquisite cantatas. It's called, "Sheep May Safely Graze." And it was playing in the toilet in Heathrow Terminal 5. I'm not saying that there was a string quartet and a couple of flute players with us in the men's room. This beautiful piece of music was filling the men's room. As all the guys and I took care of the reasons we came in there, the exquisite strains of Johann Sebastian Bach filled the stalls. As we washed our hands with soap and water without having to touch anything, as we dried our hands in an automatic hand dryer, I thought to myself, "How do I understand the dramatic economic differences between Mgambeni, Swaziland and Terminal 5?"

It's not hard for me to give thanks for a men's room that is not only spotlessly clean but is filled with the sounds of one of the world's most beautiful pieces of music. But Bach in the toilet is a pretty big contrast to a brisk wind blowing through the cracks in the corrugated tin door of the pit toilet I was using in Swaziland.

As I listened to Sheep May Safely Graze, I had to ask myself the question, "Why is there such an enormous contrast between drought-stricken Swaziland and Terminal 5 at London Heathrow Airport?" Should I be okay with the fact that there is such a tremendous economic gap between these two places? That is a very big question and it is a question worth exploring. It is a question that represents many other critical questions that I think we need to talk about.

Being a follower of Jesus, growing as a disciple of Jesus

requires that we learn how to see the world as it is. We must be willing to see and experience the realities facing the people of our communities and not look away from them.

If we are going to keep up with the Spirit of God and what He is doing in the world, we need to learn how to see and listen differently. Our God is an incredibly kind God. He is a God of steadfast love, a God of compassion and grace, a God of mercy who wants to transform us into people who not only have the correct theology about showing mercy, but are actually becoming more merciful people.

And one of the places we learn mercy is by spending time in prayer with a God who *is* mercy. As we experience more of the mercy God has for us, we will become more merciful people. As I embrace the fact that I don't just need a little ointment here and there but need a complete transformation of my heart and character, I will begin to see how much I am in need of God's mercy. And when God's mercy is what really begins to define my life, I will be on my way to becoming a person who can show mercy to others.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org and the audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by email: fpchkoolau@gmail.com