

Today's vocabulary of faith is "Mercy." Before we move into the message on mercy, I would like to invite us to check our emotional response to several images I will show on the screen. After seeing each image, mark your immediate emotional response to the image on the scale of emotions which will show above the image on the screen. This exercise is about doing a self-assessment of your feelings. Ready? Here it goes...

The scale of emotions: "Disgust....Anger....Frustration....Apathy....Sympathy....Compassion....Mercy"
Images to show: (1) Homeless person with sign asking for money, (2) Elderly person in nursing home, (3) Victim of domestic violence, (4) Natural Disasters, (5) Victims of war, (6) Obama

Mercy is commonly defined as forbearance or kindness. In particular, mercy usually involves kindness shown at a time when a severe penalty is expected. Mercy is one of God's traits, shown toward mankind. Mercy is often tied to the concept of forgiveness. For instance, if you forgive someone who has wronged or hurt you, that would be an act of mercy.

God is eager to forgive. He is glad that people are given second chances. If there is one thing that is true about people, it is this—we have a great capacity to mess up, to err and sin. But, even more infinite than our ability to sin is God's desire to forgive. We see that in the story of Jonah.

This biblical story is straightforward. God orders Jonah to go to Nineveh, the city of his enemies, Assyrians, to warn them that their days are numbered. Jonah plays the truant. He flees in the opposite direction and boards a ship for Tarshish, the most remote destination available to Jonah. Just after it embarks, a great storm arises and threatens to sink the ship.

Jonah is forced to confess to the sailors. They throw him overboard in hopes of calming the stormy sea. Instead of drowning, however, the prophet is rescued by a great fish that swallows him whole. He survives inside the fish. He prays and is consequently delivered safely back onto dry land after 3 days.

God commissioned him again. This time Jonah submits and travels to Nineveh. The people believe his prediction of doom, and they repent. When the Lord relents and forgives the people, Jonah is angry. He walks out of the city and asks God to let him die.

He sits by a shelter and a cooling vine. A worm comes to attack his leafy shade, and the prophet becomes angry. He cares more for his own comfort than for the fate of the people. God speaks to Jonah about His compassion. God reveals His own heart. Whether Jonah comprehends God's mercy or not is left unknown.

I believe the writer left it unresolved because he wants his readers to ponder. Will Jonah finally understand God's heart? Can he accept it? Do you? Can you? Even a prophet finds it hard to believe that God would spare Nineveh. The message here is this—no one is beyond God's redemption. No one can sin beyond the reach of God's mercy because His mercy knows no limit. God shows no partiality, no favoritism.

God is the God of second chances. In fact, God provides opportunities for us to do it right again in life. If we need a U-turn in life and we are willing to make it right again, then a U-turn is available for us because God is merciful. Look at Disciple Peter. He denied knowing Jesus three times and yet the Lord used him. In less than 60 days after his denial, Peter preached his first sermon and 3,000 were saved. Look at Saul, a Pharisee. He started off persecuting the church and killing Christians, but ended up being God's great servant. Through God's mercy, these amazing people got a second chance and extended mercy to others afterward.

Practicing mercy toward others does not come naturally. It did not for Jonah. Even though he was the recipient of God's mercy, he struggled to appreciate God's mercy for others. It's easy to receive mercy but not extend it. I pray that we can do better today with this. I pray that our hearts be filled with God's love, so that God's mercy and grace can flow, unhindered by our pride and prejudice.

Lives will be changed because the people come to know a forgiving God, not a judging One. God's mercy endures forever. Let us be merciful and forgiving to others as God is to us. Amen.