7th Sunday after Trinity
SERIES ON DISCIPLESHIP - THE FIFTH BEATUTUDE
West Henrietta - 1961
Rolling Meadows - 1963

Rev. Carl F. Thrun

IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 5: 7 Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

This Beatitude immediately makes us feel uncomfortable. They are strange words for our times. As someone has said: We dwell in a century which, whatever else it may be called, will never be known as the 'Century of Mercy.' God wants the world to be a happy place, where men are all kind and merciful to one another. Ours is not that kind of world! God wants you and me to be loving and merciful in all our dealings with one another. We are not always like that! The power to kill and destroy has developed into a tree of frightening proportions, while the flower of mercy has been withering away.

What is mercy? A child once said, Mercy is love in action. Mercy has eyes that are quick to see the needs of another, a heart that instantly shares the feeling of him who has need, and hands that promptly seek to supply the need. Mercy is understanding and sympathy and kindness and forgiveness all rolled into one grand little word. Mercy does not always see eye-to-eye, but it feels heart-to-heart, and it responds with more kindness than can be expected. Abraham Lincoln once said, I am sorry for the man who can't feel the whip when it is laid on the other man's back. He devoted his life to trying to restrain that whip. He was a merciful man.

To be sure, our world, in spite of all its conflicts and hatreds, its greed and selfishness, is not altogether without its evidences of mercy. When Christ says, Be ye therefore merciful - unless our heart is altogether corroded with bitterness and our eyes are blinded with selfishness - we all readily agree. That's right, we say, we ought to be more kind and considerate of one another. Mercy is not contrary to what we would like to be and know we ought to do. But what we say and what we actually do are often worlds apart.

To many people an overabundance of mercy just doesn't make good sense. You've got to be hard, they say, and show your strength. This is the kind of language people understand. This was true in Christ's day, as it is in ours. The true Roman had a high regard for what he felt were sturdy virtues: wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage. But mercy was soft stuff. Brutality in the handling of

slaves and revenge in the treatment of an enemy were regarded as expressions of strength. Kindness to a loved one was not uncommon, but pity was unbecoming a good Roman. Mercy had little chance to grow in such hard ground.

Many of the religious leaders of Christ's day believed and taught that men suffered according to the evil they had done and that great suffering was the result of great sin. When they came upon hardship, their first reaction was, He's getting what he has coming. With such attitudes, the impulse to be merciful and helpful ~~were~~ was quickly stifled.

Do you remember Christ's story about the Good Samaritan? The world must never forget it. A man who was travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho fell into the hands of robbers. They not only took everything he had, they half killed him and left him to die by the roadside. An Old Testament priest happened to come along. Unfortunately he had a stone where his heart should have been. Untouched by the suffering of his fellowman, he passed by without displaying a trace of pity. A Levite did the same loveless thing. Then came a Samaritan. Although he was a bitter national enemy of the man who lay battered and bleeding, his heart was in the right place and he was most merciful. Carefully he dressed the wounds of the victim, took him to a place where he could recuperate and paid all the bills.

Christ presented the Good Samaritan as a model of mercy not merely because he did the right thing, but because he did it from the right motives. Christ said the Good Samaritan had compassion on the wounded man. To be merciful is more than to be kind and helpful. Mercy is more than words and actions. Genuine mercy begins with feelings. Ask yourself, How do you feel when a man of different skin sits down next to you on a bus? How do you feel toward that rather obnoxious alcoholic who lives across the street, or even toward someone living in the same house with you - gramma or grampa, perhaps, who have slowed down with the years and now tend to wear on your nerves? When Sir Launfal was looking for the Holy Grail, he met a beggar who was asking for alms. Sir Launfal was annoyed by the inconvenience of the interruption. Yet he did not refuse to help the beggar. He

tossed him a valuable coin, in dusgust and without mercy. The beggar had great need, but he also had a pride that would not let him accept such a loveless gift. And so, the beggar left the coin in the dust.

Mercy is more than an act. It includes the feeling that leads to the act. Mercy begins in the heart, but it must not end there. Mercy cannot live only in the heart; it must get out and express itself in action. Mercy does more than weep with the sorrowing; it comforts him. Mercy does more than feel sorry for the hungry; it feeds him. Mercy does more than sympathize with the oppressed; it defends him. Mercy does more than lament the sad state of the afflicted in the world; it tries to help them. There is no mistaking the cry of a ragged, starving child, or the timid handclasp of the friendless and downtrodden. Need speaks a universal language and hunger knows no iron curtain. The beggars with their sores were pitiful in Jesus' day, but what we often fail to remember is that such pitiful people are still with us today. We need to look at the suffering and homelessness of thousands and even millions in our time through the merciful eyes of Jesus.

In his LIFE OF JOHN BRIGHT, Trevelyan tells an incident from the life of John Bright's father. On one occasion when John's father was coming home from town, he came upon the scene of an accident. A neighbor's horse had been killed. A crowd had gathered around the sad man saying how sorry there were. To the man who was proclaiming his sorrow most loudly, John's father said, I am sorry five pounds. How much are you sorry? A hat was passed to buy the man a new horse. That is mercy in action.

Mercy begins with God. There are those who feel that God, as He is presented in the Old Testament, is stern and hard. True, in His justice God can be terribly stern and His condemnation is something to be feared. It is frightfully true what Shakespeare has Portia say to Shylock, Though justice be thy plea, consider this, that in the course of justice, none of us should see salvation. But the man who knows God's mercy need not fear His judgment. In the Old Testament

alone the concept of mercy occurs 150 times and usually it concerns God's attitude toward man. Moses tells his people, The Lord is long-suffering and of great mercy. When David is to be punished for his great sin and has to choose between seven years of famine, or three months of being pursued by his enemy, or three days of pestilence his answer is, Let us now fall into the hand of the Lord; for His mercy is great: and let us not fall into the hand of man.

The New Testament overflows with references to God's mercy. Its brief and thrilling theme is, God is love. The heart of the New Testament is Christ's assurance: God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. Someone has said, Our hearts are very frail; and there are places where the road is very steep and lonely. But we do have a wonderful God and nowhere is that more clearly evident than when we stand at the foot of Christ's Cross. I wish it were possible for all people of the world - men, women, and children of every clime and every color - to stand there at the foot of the Cross, that together we might be overwhelmed with the mercy that moved Christ to die for the sins of all mankind. He loves us, every one of us. He understands our frailties and our weaknesses. He is distressed by the sinfulness of our life. But He was willing to die for us that by faith and trust in Him, we might have forgiveness of all our sins and the joy of heaven forever. Surely, this ought to move us to be more merciful to one another. If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another!

Christ said, Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Does this mean that men will be more merciful to us if we show mercy to them? Sometimes, perhaps, but not always. Look at Christ. He was the most merciful man that ever lived and His own people tortured and killed Him. God is merciful to us - not because we are merciful to one another, or because we have earned His mercy, or deserve it - but because of His unbounded love. The fact remains, however, that once we have stood under the blinding rays of God's great, forgiving mercy, we cannot help being merciful to one another. We cannot receive God's mercy unless we in turn show mercy. Christ taught us to pray, Forgive us, as we forgive others.

At the Cross mercy triumphed over justice in the heart of God, and every condition was fulfilled that was required to set men free from the power that thwarts their lives. To walk in that mercy is to know freedom from worry about the future, for the future lies with God. It is to know freedom from worry about the present, because each day is a walk in fellowship with our Lord. And it is to know freedom from worry about the past, because the blood of Jesus Christ His son Cleaneseth us from all sin. On his deathbed Thomas Hooker was told, Now you will receive your reward for your great life. No! said Hooker, Now I will receive God's mercy for my sinful life. Some day you and I will have a chance to say, when our life comes to a close, Now I will receive God's mercy for my sinful life. While we wait for that time to come, let us do all in our power to be merciful to one another, to everyone.

Amen.