

**First United Methodist Church
618 Eighth Street
Columbus, IN 47201**

**Rev. Howard E. Boles
September 22, 2019**

“The Values by Which We Live: Mercy”
Text: Luke 16:1-13

A man dies and finds himself standing at the gates of heaven. As expected, St. Peter is asking people questions before they are allowed into heaven. The man gets nervous wondering what he will be asked. When he gets to the front of the line, St. Peter smiles and says, “Can you spell love?” The man spells it correctly and St. Peter says, “Come on in.”

The man watches this process as one after another person is asked to spell a simple word and then welcomed into heaven. The man said, “You know, I always thought it would be more difficult to get into heaven.” St. Peter nods understandingly and tells him that God’s mercy is broad and generous.

The man comes back every day to watch the process. Finally after a year, St. Peter says, “I have an errand to run. You know how this works. Would you like to stand in for me for a moment?” The man consents.

One of the first people in line is his former brother-in-law. While on earth, the brother-in-law wrecked the man’s car and bilked him out of thousands of dollars always promising to repay him. “What happened,” asked the man sitting in for St. Peter.

“Well, after you died, I won the lottery. I bought a lovely home on the ocean, a new sports car and have been traveling the world. Life has been good! While driving on the autobahn I had an accident and here I am. So what do I have to do to get in?”

The man replied, “It’s pretty simple, all you have to do is spell one word.”

The former brother in law smiled and said, “Wonderful, what’s the word?”

“Czechoslovakia.”

Cute story, but I think it illustrates two very important aspects for our sermon this morning. The first is that I suspect that God is a lot more merciful than we realize. In many different places the scriptures speak of God as being slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God meets our shortcomings not with anger or a need for vengeance, but with open arms to welcome us back with love.

The second aspect of this story is that it reminds us that we can struggle with mercy. We like to be on the receiving end of mercy, but we can be very stingy when it comes to others. It is not

uncommon to hold onto grudges or to delight in the downfall of someone who has done us wrong. Our mercy toward others can be very limited. But today's parable invites us to a new set of values to guide our lives.

Jesus tells this parable with two characters. There is a wealthy man and his steward. The role of the steward is to care for the resources of the wealthy man. This is his responsibility. The ability to do this well is based upon an understanding of the rich man and how he would manage his resources if he was doing so.

Unlike many of Jesus' parables, this one does not have a distinctive good character or bad character. Both have good qualities and both have some negatives. As such, these are individuals we can readily identify with, they have something in common with us.

The rich man receives a report that the steward has been misusing his property. No details are provided as to how this is being done, but the rich man is disappointed. He summons the steward and asks for a full accounting of his resources. Along with that, he indicates that the steward will have his responsibilities removed from him. That is to say, he will soon be fired.

The steward leaves this meeting and questions what he should do next. As he indicates in the parable, he is not strong enough for manual labor. And he doesn't want to beg. He has nothing to fall back upon. He hasn't prepared himself for the possibility and he has no ideas what to do.

So, because others are aware that he will be fired, he devises a plan. He calls all the people who owe the master money and begins to take an accounting of their debts. To the one who owed the master one hundred jugs of oil, he tells him to make it fifty. With a quick change on the accounting sheet, his debt is now diminished by 50%.

Next comes a man who owed his master 100 containers of wheat. He tells him to make it eighty and once again the recipient of this kindness is grateful. This is still a substantial debt, but it will take less time to repay 80 containers than it will to repay 100. Perhaps, the debtor surmises, there is hope that he may be relieved of this debt.

By doing these things, the steward accomplished something very important. He is insuring himself good will. When news of his firing becomes public, there will be people who remember his kindness and mercy. Perhaps, he hopes, they will have mercy on him as well.

His actions also create good will toward the rich man. The level of debts described was so high that it is likely that the debtors would have ever been able to repay it. By reducing the amount owed, his mercy will benefit the rich man as well.

This is where the parable takes an unexpected turn. One would expect that once the rich man discovers what the steward has done that he would be even angrier. Who authorized him to decrease these debts? His actions are cutting the rich man out of future profits and you would expect him to be angry about this. He is not. In fact, he seems grateful. He praises the steward for his mercy. This is not what one might expect to happen. The steward seems happy about what has transpired!

This brings us back to the role of a steward. Their actions are to be dictated by the values of the owner. The fact that rich man was angry at the beginning of the parable indicates that the steward was not doing this. He was holding the debts, allowing them to accumulate, creating a burden that would continue throughout the debtor's lifetime. But, it appears this is not what the owner wanted. He was elated when the steward used his resources to bring mercy and kindness to others. He wasn't looking to enslave those who owed him. And when the steward showed mercy, what he was doing was managing the resources in the spirit of the owner. This brought delight to him.

One of the points Jesus is making with this parable is to encourage us to follow the example of God in showing mercy to one another. Be quick to forgive. Put down the burdens and leave behind the grudges. Set people free from the guilt and shame in the same manner that God would have for us.

The book club this evening will be discussing Annie Dillard's book, "The Maytrees." I admit that Annie Dillard's style of writing can be both rich but challenging. But the gist of the story is a powerful message. It centers on the lives of Toby and Lou Maytree. Toby and Lou fall in love, marry and have a child. All seems to be well until the day Toby surprises his wife with the news that he is walking away from the marriage. He has fallen in love with Lou's friend Dreary. The next day, Toby and Dreary leave for Maine and begin their lives together.

More than two decades pass. Dreary becomes terminally ill. Toby is caring for her, but he falls in the snow breaking several bones. He can no longer care for her on his own. What can he do? He weighs all the options and reluctantly decides that the only possibility is to return to Lou and ask if she will care for them.

It is an intriguing premise. When Toby shows up on the doorstep in desperation, he explains the need. Lou hears him out and then reflects on whether she should assure him quickly that she will take them in or make him stew a bit. And then she answers her own question saying, "Of course she would take them in. Anyone would."

When I read those words, I put the book down and stopped reading. Anyone would? Would I? If someone who had hurt me deeply came to me in need, would I be kind enough to help them? What would you do? Lou had already begun to figure out how to reconfigure the house so that Dreary would be comfortable in whatever days she had remaining. She was making space for her ex-husband and reordering her home and her life for them.

This has always struck me as a powerful example. I don't know how many people would respond with that level of kindness, but even in a book of fiction, it reminds me that it is possible. I could do this, if I chose. Any of us could. The question becomes do we choose to be kind and merciful or will we choose to be unkind and vengeful?

After Dreary and Toby move into the home, something equally as surprising begins to happen. The members of the community respond to the need. People come by to visit. Neighbors bring food. People offered to help drive them to doctor's appointments. The community, which was

also scandalized when Toby ran off with Dreary, is able to set aside their hurts to help someone in need. The author doesn't explain this, but I believe it all stems from the mercy shown by Lou.

I believe that mercy begets mercy. Kindness invites kindness. Forgiveness opens the hearts for more forgiveness. Had Lou held onto the anger and hurt, the community would have likely responded in kind, ridiculing Dreary and Toby. Instead they were able to surround Dreary's last days with love and kindness. All because of the example of one kind soul.

Isn't that the intent of the Golden Rule. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." How would we want to be treated? Would we want to be met with mercy or judgement? The ability to be merciful is found in the ability to put ourselves into the shoes of the other person and imagine what they are going through. If we were in their situation, what would we want to have happen?

Mercy is one of the most challenging teachings of the Bible because it asks us to go against what might feel like the natural human. When someone hurts us, our initial response is to want that person to hurt as well. When someone has done us wrong, we often want to see bad things befall them. Mercy goes against the grain. It asks us to be forgiving, to be compassionate, to be merciful even when we might wish to do otherwise. Turn the other cheek, love your enemy, be kind to all people without exception.

Think of it this way. Cruelty begets cruelty, inhumanity begets more inhumanity and violence begets violence. By the same token, kindness begets kindness, compassion begets compassion and mercy begets mercy. The question to ask is what do we want to send out into the world? Do we want to send more inhumanity or do we want to break that cycle and send compassion? And if we think of the things as a perpetual cycle, it all leads back to what do we want to return to us. The values we send out into the world are the values that will come back to us.

French author Jean Giono has a brief novel entitled, "The Man Who Planted Trees and Grew Happiness." It tells about a traveler who encounters a desolated area. Nothing is growing there. But while traveling through, he encounters a man who invites him to come stay at his home. After a nice meal, he watches as this man carefully selects 100 acorns and places them in his satchel. Every day, the man goes into this desolated area and plants the acorns. Many years later, the traveler is passing through the area only to discover that has changed completely. It is now a lush, fertile land. There are trees and grass and wild animals inhabiting this once desolated area. No one can explain what happened, but the traveler knows the secret. He concludes his account by saying, "When I reflect that one man, armed only with his own physical and moral resources, was able to cause this land of Canaan to spring from the wasteland, I am convinced that in spite of everything, humanity is admirable. But when I compute the unfailing greatness of spirit and the tenacity of benevolence that it must have taken to achieve this result, I am taken with an immense respect for that old and unlearned peasant who was able to complete a work worthy of God."

When our hearts are filled with compassion and kindness, we have the ability to plant seeds of mercy in every direction. And without fully knowing the results, those seeds will continue to expand and grow. That is the seed Jesus planted with this parable.