

Shiloh United Methodist Church
Mercy is Blessing Others with Grace

Genesis 19:1-3,
Psalm 145:9

Rev. Tyler Amundson

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Genesis 19 Common English Bible (CEB)

19 The two messengers entered Sodom in the evening. Lot, who was sitting at the gate of Sodom, saw them, got up to greet them, and bowed low. ² He said, “Come to your servant’s house, spend the night, and wash your feet. Then you can get up early and go on your way.”

But they said, “No, we will spend the night in the town square.” ³ He pleaded earnestly with them, so they went with him and entered his house. He made a big meal for them, even baking unleavened bread, and they ate.

Psalm 145:9

⁹ The Lord is good to everyone and everything;
God’s compassion extends to all his handiwork!”

On a balmy October afternoon in 1982, Badger stadium in Madison, Wisconsin, was packed. More than 60,000 die-hard University of Wisconsin supporters were watching their football team take on the Michigan State Spartans. MSU had the better team. What seemed odd, however, as the score became lopsided, were the bursts of applause and shouts of joy from the Wisconsin fans. How could they cheer when their team was losing?

It turned out that seventy miles away the Milwaukee Brewers were beating the St. Louis Cardinals in game three of the World Series. Many

of the fans in the stands were listening to portable radios—and responding to something other than their immediate circumstances.¹

This week we continue our series on Faith by Numbers, and as I shared we are studying grace this month. This week and next we are studying the Methodist means of grace. On your Grow Pray Study guide you will find today's questions will help you explore in your life where you might be practicing works of mercy. And where you might want to grow in this area. Works of Mercy are the practices of grace that help us to connect to our neighbor.

On the back you will see our Methodist cross of discipleship, on the top are Mercy and Justice, these are the two areas we are concentrating on today. Below you will see a rule of life written by Methodists in our area, helping you understand how to live grace out in your life. I encourage you to take a look at this rule as you consider how to move ahead in your walk of faith.

Mercy(connecting with others) are the bottom of the circle.

Piety(connecting to God) is the top of the circle.

Mercy is both acts of merciful love to those that need support, a caring hand to those in need individually, but also acts of justice those acts that right systems of oppression and injustice in the world. We do mercy as individuals to other individuals and justice we do as a community of believers to change the world for the better.

The scriptures chosen for today were chosen to remind us of two things from scripture: 1. Showing hospitality to strangers is how we entertain God unbeknown to us. 2. Acts of mercy and justice are for all people, and God calls us to share them with all people in a strangely unbalanced way we call grace, and force that is not about fairness, but about righteousness.

¹ Adapted from the story found here: <https://bible.org/article/our-relationship-god-experiencing-future-now-romans-51-5>

The Genesis passage you will notice is from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. A tale that for much of the 20th century was used to specifically talk about sexual morality, but in so doing has lost a vast majority of the meaning it had for Jesus' followers. This story was wrapped into a section of the Torah called the Parashat Vayera. What is important about this section is it is about how the leaders of the people, in this case Abram and other patriarchs, were able to see God when they shared hospitality and trusted God was bigger than their immediate circumstances.

Our scripture from Genesis today has Lot, Abrahams cousin seeing heavenly travelers and he offers them hospitality and protects them at all costs. They in turn protect Lot, and this seeing and protecting is what I correlate to the works of mercy and justice being lived out. It is when we recognize God showing up that we begin to understand how to work for justice and mercy for the people in front of us, and in turn God helps us know we are loved by God again, and again.

I want to remind us we can feel God's love without us doing anything to receive it, but we can recognize it more and more in our lives through practice.

That is why I believe this section from Genesis is so important, it is a reminder to watch for the real God, the one who can actually transform the world. It is why I love this midrash, this story between the story about Abraham when he was a little boy.

Terah (Abraham's father) was an idol manufacturer who once went away and left Abraham in charge of the store. A man walked in and wished to buy an idol. Abraham asked him how old he was and the man responded "50 years old." Abraham then said, "You are 50 years old and would worship a day old statue!" At this point the man left, ashamed.

Later, a woman walked into the store and wanted to make an offering to the idols. So Abraham took a stick, smashed the idols and placed the stick in the hand of the largest idol. When Terah returned, he asked Abraham what happened to all the idols. Abraham told him that a woman came in to make an offering to the idols. The idols argued about which one should eat the offering first, then the largest idol took the stick and smashed all the other idols. Terah responded by saying that they are only statues and have no knowledge. Whereupon Abraham responded by saying that you deny their knowledge, yet you worship them! At this point, Terah took Abraham to Nimrod(his brother).

Nimrod proclaims to Abraham that we should worship fire. Abraham responds that water puts out fire. So Nimrod declares they worship water. Abraham responds that clouds hold water. So Nimrod declares they worship clouds. Abraham responds that wind pushes clouds. So Nimrod declares they worship wind. Abraham responds that people withstand wind.

Nimrod becomes angry with Abraham and declares that Abraham shall be cast into the fire, and if Abraham is correct, i.e. that there is a real God, then that God will save him. Abraham is cast into the fire and is saved by God.²

This myth from the ancient days of the cultural religion Jesus grew up understanding is a reminder that our God is one of transformation that will work through us, and that we should not trust in simple superstition, but in the true power of God to transform the world.

These acts of mercy and justice we do, I believe whole heartedly happen because God works through us. The grace we have been talking about all month works through us to transform our neighbor and in turn I believe just a like a relationship with God that it transforms us in a powerful way.

Let me give you a few examples, and again these are both individual ones, so they are acts of mercy on your Wesleyan cross on your GPS.

I have a friend who is a pastor and he got into an interesting situation. He bought a snow blower and he would get up in the morning, after a snow and remove snow from both sides of his corner lot. When he would come inside he would feel a sense of accomplishment. One day he thought, “What if I just did the whole length of my block. He didn’t just do his one corner on both sides of his house he ended up doing two sides of his block. He said at first he felt a little grumpy getting up, but after he finished he felt he had accomplished something no one could take away from him in his day.

Well eventually it became a game, to get up 10 minutes earlier than usual, so Bob the neighbor next door wouldn’t steal his moment of joy by shoveling his own sidewalk.

One day the neighbors next to him brought him a plat of cookies and he thought in his head, “I didn’t do this for the cookies, sure my kids will eat them, but don’t steal my joy by giving me something for this accomplishment.” Then the cookie people said, we have a dance studio

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_and_the_Idol_Shop#cite_note-7

can we borrow your snow blower, for my pastor friend it felt good to give more than he was getting.³

This mercy offering to individuals is what Sister Helen Prejean calls “sneaky Jesus.” You start offering one thing for God and Jesus surprises you. If you believe in a God who transforms you are less surprised, but then again never be so sure you know where God is because he may walk right into your home.

Sister Helen Prejean was a simple nun who one day heard another nun asking if people would write letters to death row inmates. Helen said, “Yes.” She gave an affirmative response because how hard could it be for an English major to keep up correspondence with someone. This is how God works through us, small things grow.

Well through her correspondence Sister Helen began to have a real dialogue with one of the inmates. She then found herself working to have a meeting to pray with one of the death row inmates. Then she learned that prior to death the only person who could be present for a period of time was a spiritual advisor, so she became a spiritual advisor to this inmate in the last hours of his life. This inmate said she did not have to be present when he died, how could he make her watch this. To which she responded, “I am going the only one watching who will be sharing God’s love with you, this is my job.” Sister Helen shares she believes “sneaky Jesus” is what called her to be present through all this, it is was called her from this act of mercy to seeking justice through ending the death penalty. You may have heard or seen her story, she is the nun from the book and movie “Dead Man Walking.”⁴

Sister Helen, demonstrates how God can be a transforming power if we learn to recognize God. That sneaky Jesus can take hold of us and how

³ https://johnstown.church/podcast-download/593/even-the-ugly-seeds-grow.mp3?ref=new_window

⁴ <https://www.gonzaga.edu/news-events/stories/2018/3/20/sister-helen-prejean-sneaky-jesus>

what seems like a small act of mercy can call us to a place of true justice. Sister Helena now works alongside Christians throughout this nation to work towards ending the death penalty, because too many innocent or misjudged people have been lost.

And lest we think Sister Helen and the Catholics have a corner on this transformation by a sneaky Jesus and a transforming God. Let's not forget our friend John we have been studying these past weeks. This man who was afraid he would not be able to tackle any big problems again in his life, who found his life transformed by God. John Wesley who methodized, and got a movement of Christians going who would transform the world through mercy, justice, worship and devotion.

John Wesley later in his life would write deeply about ending another institution which many rationalized with the Bible for another 100+ years and some would try to bring it back even today. John took on slavery, John said this to one of the lead abolitionists in the world.

“Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, til even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.” – John Wesley to Wilberforce

John Wesley knew that at times the people who make up the church will at times have to stand up to transform the ways of the world. He knew that “sneaky Jesus” was a reality and that God might seem to others like a force making us cheer when we should be jeering, and force us to change our whole opinion because of who God put in front of us.

I want to leave us with some wisdom from our tradition and a friend for how we go do justice and mercy.

First, it can feel like you have to do big things to overcome all the bad in the world and share God's love. Yet, Jesus and others always share

small things are what move mountains, and mustard seeds are the right size for big faith to start. So my snow blowing pastor friend says,

“You can’t do everything, so do something.”

This week on your GPS you will see a link to spiritual gifts, and I talk about it in my Pastors corner. I encourage you to take a spiritual gifts inventory to see if there is a gift God has given you to do good, that you have yet to consider. I will have paper copies in the back after worship if you want them. God uses our gifts to help transform the world, and I as your pastor would love feedback on your gifts and to offer pastoral guidance for you to see where God might call you next.

Second thing I want to have us do, is to re-affirm baptismal vows and we will touch baptismal water as we come up for communion today. Our baptismal vows call us to acts of mercy. As we end our time today, as you seek in your heart where you might let that sneaky Jesus into your life, where you might let God show up and invite you on a journey, and where an outside force might call you to a new way of cheering that you commit to your vows of baptism again.

We will end our message by me sharing the vows, which are on page page 40 of your Red Hymnal UMH, I invite you to simply say a loud Amen as I lift my hands 3 times after each stanza of the vows of baptism.

On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you:
Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness,
reject the evil powers of this world,
and repent of your sin?

Amen

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you
to resist evil, injustice, and oppression
in whatever forms they present themselves?

Amen

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior,
put your whole trust in his grace,
and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened
to people of all ages, nations, and races?

Amen