

*Mercy: You Can Never Get Enough*

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*Psalm 1; Luke 18:9-14*

The onetime Poet Laureate of the United States Philip Levine wrote a poem called “The Mercy.” It tells the story of his mother, when she was nine years old, traveling across the Atlantic Ocean and eventually to the Midwest as an immigrant from Russia in 1913. She was on a ship that would be anchored for a month off of Ellis Island in medical quarantine after smallpox started killing passengers and crewmembers one by one. That ship, a transport full of death and discovery, was named “The Mercy.”

Recounting his mother’s memories, Levine’s poem describes a dislocated nine-year-old girl voyaging alone and trying to eat a banana without knowing she had to unpeel it first. A kind sailor on The Mercy gives this little Jewish girl her first-ever bite of an orange. Then he wipes her mouth with his bandana, and teaches her how to pronounce the strange English word: orange. Repeating it over and over again for her. Orange. Orange.

Levine ends his haunting poem about suffering and improbable survival like this:

A nine-year-old girl travels  
all night by train with one suitcase and an orange.  
She learns that mercy is something you can eat  
again and again while the juice spills over  
your chin, you can wipe it away with the back  
of your hands and you can never get enough.<sup>i</sup>

Mercy – it's the reality that liberates us and gives fresh starts. Recognizing mercy is recognizing that God accepts us and heals us. Recognizing that others have received mercy is a key step in working toward justice. We can never get enough of it, the mercy.

The Bible frequently talks about the abundance of God's mercy as if it's something inexhaustible or something we can never outrun.

Psalm 103 speaks of God removing our transgressions from us as far as the east is removed from the west.<sup>ii</sup>

Psalm 89 extols God's love and faithfulness toward us as established forever and as firm as the heavens.<sup>iii</sup> Such statements appealing to time and the vastness of the universe might strike us even more dramatically this week, after we've seen stunning images of the universe's scale from the Webb Space Telescope.

Psalm 23, that sturdy psalm about God as a shepherd who leads us to green pastures and prepares a table for us, it includes the line: "Surely goodness and mercy [loving kindness] shall follow me all the days of my life."<sup>iv</sup> A better translation than "follow me" is "pursue me" or "chase me." God's mercy will hunt us all down. You can't throw it off your trail.

The Bible's authors aren't above using hyperbole to get our attention.

And yet, we have a habit of going the other direction, of wanting to restrict mercy. Sometimes this is excluding ourselves. Maybe you doubt that mercy can extend to you.

Sometimes restricting mercy manifests itself in our unwillingness to admit that someone else can receive it. We attach conditions and presume that God operates with the same criteria we do.

Ultimately when we regard mercy as a limited resource that has to be carefully measured, as a piece of fruit too precious to share with another traveler, we suffer from a defective view of who God is.

We can blame our culture for that tendency, because of the ways that our economy leads many to make competition and stockpiling into virtues. But part of the blame also rests on how we Christians have allowed our theological traditions to fashion the ways we think.

Religious people are susceptible to zero-sum thinking in matters of faith. For someone to receive mercy, we assume someone else needs to suffer retribution. Our traditions speak of angels and demons. You're either part of the wheat or part of the chaff. The sheep and goats need to be divided. Jacob gets the blessing, while his brother Esau becomes a morality tale for lost opportunity. We make sainthood appear more enticing by vilifying sinners, and all of it can stem from an assumption that God operates

with only limited supplies. What if mercy runs out of its juice?

Consider Psalm 1. There the technique of making a sharp contrast means to heighten the urgency – the righteous versus the wicked, the fruitful tree versus the dying plant. It's an effective motivator to good behavior and a relatively simple object lesson. We see teachings that follow this pattern in both Testaments, and they're often useful. But we misread this kind of symbolism if we extend it to describe two exclusive ways of being in the world or to establish that there are just two kinds of people in the world. The risk there is that we construct a religious system composed of only obvious winners and losers. We draw lines. We create ideological purity tests to know who's one of us and who's one of them. We survey complex issues of injustice and find ourselves too eager to assign blame to one group alone.

We mustn't let the allegorical nature of some of our religious traditions lead us into simplistic assumptions that blessing is a blessing only if someone else is doesn't get to have it.

In Luke's Gospel Jesus tells a parable with only two characters. Two very different Jewish men – a Pharisee

and a tax collector – go to the Jerusalem Temple to pray and they offer very different prayers. At first glance the story appears simple to understand: don't be like the arrogant religious person but instead emulate the man who humbly begs for mercy. The parable seems to suggest you only get mercy if you beg hard enough for it.

But if we sit with this parable for a bit and peel away the layers things get a little more complicated. It's not as simple as choosing to imitate one character over the other.

The parable pulls us into an experience that can reveal our tendency to underestimate God's mercy.

The Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine (no relation to the poet Philip Levine) points out that the parable does more than offer two different recognizable kinds of people – a Pharisee and a tax collector. It overdraws both of them, making each one a kind of parody.<sup>v</sup>

We have a contrast – one man a paragon of respectability and admiration, the other an object of his neighbors’ contempt. But each one also exhibits some extremes, beyond the usual stereotypes. The crowd listening to Jesus tell the story probably chuckles a little bit at the exaggerations.

The Pharisee – the man of religious devotion – is over-the-top. Jesus describes a man exceedingly scrupulous in his religious observances. He fasts twice a week, which is much more than anything in Torah requires. He donates a tenth on literally anything he brings into his home, not just what he produces or earns but also on what he buys or collects – again going far beyond what any scriptural teachings require. And yet in the story there’s no indication we should assume he’s lying about any of this. His prayer to God is all about thanksgiving, not boasting: he’s legitimately grateful for how his life has worked out and how he’s been able to cultivate habits of faithfulness. Perhaps he acknowledges the privilege that allows him to live as he does. He finds satisfaction if not joy in his faithfulness. He knows his life might have turned out much differently if he had made other choices and lived dishonestly. And yet his prayer suggests he has contempt for the other guy in the story.

As for the other guy, he collects taxes levied by imperial occupiers. He's a Jew who's opted to make a living by extorting his own people. Think of ancient tax collectors as part mobster and part Martin Shkreli, the man who jacked up prices of vital prescription medications. The tax collector shakes money out of his neighbors who probably view him as a terrible person – both hated and feared.

But this particular tax collector veers into a comedic depiction when he prays. What he says is beautiful, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” He shows contrition. He turns to God for mercy. He names himself as a sinner. But notice what he *doesn't* say. There's no “I'm sorry.” And he gives no indication that he's going to give up his work as a tax collector. Maybe he thinks he's trapped in the racket. Maybe he doesn't care. Maybe the benefits are just too good. But how can *this guy* of all people ask God for mercy without promising to make a clean break from all the lack of mercy he has shown to his neighbors? It sounds like he's presuming that God's mercy is his to claim, even if it won't make a difference in how he lives from this point forward.

In other words, don't be too quick to judge the Pharisee as a liar. And don't be too quick to assume that the tax collector isn't still interested in gaming the system, even the one run by a gracious God.

Parables have a way of holding a mirror up to us, helping us examine our assumptions about how the world *should* work or how the mercy of God *should* be doled out.

When the tax collector goes home justified, which means he is set in right relationship with God, a natural response is to grumble. We know what it's like when people ask forgiveness but never change, or when people promise "thoughts and prayers" but don't work to change policies. Isn't God being a little too eager to show generosity? We want to rule some people out or demand more from them. And yet the parable urges us to widen our view of God's mercy.

If we assume the tax collector has disqualified himself from divine mercy we end up sounding like the Pharisee in his prayer.

And if we thank God we're not like that prissy and smug Pharisee, not only have we misread the parable but we start to sound like him, too, assuming that some people are beyond God's mercy. The parable closes in on us like a trap. We find ourselves resembling the flawed characters. Maybe no one approaches God with pure motives and with a clear basis to claim God's mercy.

Yet mercy spills out from God anyway.

This is about more than learning to be nicer or patient with people, or learning to love your neighbors who might be total scoundrels or Christians of another variety whom you avoid talking to about faith, Bible, politics, or family when you greet them on the street. It's about embracing the truth that God shows mercy to all. No one is beyond its reach. Not me. Not you. Not even the people we despise, despite our best efforts. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" is a pretty good prayer for all of us. It's the starting point. God will help work out what happens after that, in due time. We are all long-term projects.

Another way this parable asks us to widen our view of God's mercy resides in what happens with the Pharisee. Christian tradition has tried to write him off as sanctimonious and hypocritical; some of that comes from

the anti-Judaism that has plagued the church for its whole history, this sick belief that blessings to Christians must entail condemnation of Jews.

Amy-Jill Levine points out that there's a translation debate that matters for understanding the ending of the parable and the importance of the Pharisee. Where the parable concludes, Jesus might be saying that the tax collector "went down to his home justified rather than the other," that is, the Pharisee. But the words can also be translated that the tax collector "went down to his home justified *alongside* the other," along with the Pharisee.

In other words, maybe one of the parable's surprises is that we really don't control the levers to determine who receives mercy. Divine mercy isn't a zero-sum system.

If we recoil at the suggestion that these two extreme characters might *both* receive God's mercy, despite their imperfect understandings of how freely divine grace flows, then probably *we also* lack that understanding. It's a rather startling idea, this notion of boundless grace.

What if God truly is that generous? Well, then there *is* enough mercy – *more than enough* for you, actually. No

reason to doubt it. No reason to hold yourself to standards that God does not share.

Today is a good day for baptisms. In the Presbyterian Church we're fond of saying that baptism enacts and seals what the word of God says to us. In other words, baptism is an embodied expression of what God has already revealed: that God's mercy is offered to all people. We acknowledge that the prayer "God, be merciful" has already been answered – for each of us, and for the young ones being baptized. Baptism acts out what is already true: it declares God's grace to be life-giving, free, mysterious, and finally beyond our ability to limit or control. Just like biting into a juicy orange, it's a wet, tangible, refreshing, joyful, and messy act. Think of Philip Levine's mother, a little girl delivered safely through dangerous waters, surrounded by disease, yet sucking on sweet fruit while carried on something called The Mercy.

Don't be fooled by the tiny basin in the baptismal font and the little pitcher. There's nothing shallow or finite about these waters. Divine extravagance is their source, so the waters can't be contained in the church's architecture. Baptizing the children among us into the wideness of God's mercy is a way we all live out what is true: we can never get enough. And yet there's more than enough for

each of us, and anyone else. Trust in that. And then we'll all go home justified today.

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php%3Fdate=2002%252F11%252F25.html>;  
[https://www.pw.org/content/philip\\_levine\\_reads\\_the\\_mercy](https://www.pw.org/content/philip_levine_reads_the_mercy)

<sup>ii</sup> Psalm 103:12.

<sup>iii</sup> Psalm 89:2.

<sup>iv</sup> Psalm 23:6.

<sup>v</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Stories Jesus Told: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (HarperOne, 2014), 169–95; Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Luke* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge University Press, 2018), 489–95.