

Good morning, from a dark, chilly hill in Rockport....

Last Sunday, the theme was “religion.” This Sunday, the theme is “mercy.” The word “mercy” appears between 275 and 467 times in the Bible, depending on which source you use to find the word and which translation of the Bible you consider! The word “love” is mentioned about 350 times, again depending on which Bible you’re reading. So, we could say mercy trumps love.... at least in the Bible! What do you think? Which is more important – mercy or love? Mark 10:47 reads, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Throughout the New Testament, our sacred ancestors cry out, “Jesus, have mercy on me!” I have yet to discover a text from the Bible that says, “Jesus, love me!” Think about that....

Blessings to each one this first Sunday of September. I hope some of you reading these words can join me for worship and holy communion this morning in our sanctuary.... Susan

### **“mercy triumphs over judgment”**

**A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston**

**Thomaston, Maine**

**Sunday, September 5, 2021**

**Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet**

**Scripture: James 2:1-17**

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts. Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For the one who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?” So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. James 2:1-17 (NRSV)

Will you pray with me. Compassionate God, have mercy upon us this day as we sort out the holy words of your servant James. Teach us how to not point

fingers at any others with whom we don't like or are at odds. Help us to "get it," O God, that when we judge others, we also judge ourselves. And that is your job, not ours. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you this day, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I want to talk about mercy today. Our reading from James this morning says, "For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment." (Jas 2:13-14)

What is mercy? (get responses) One of the quotes inside your bulletins today comes from the 11<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*: "Mercy implies compassion that forebears punishing even when justice demands it." Mercy implies compassion.

But showing mercy to others, receiving mercy from others, and acknowledging the mercy of God upon us are all very difficult tasks. James helps his readers and hearers understand that above all else, no matter how bad or good we've been, no matter how much we've sinned or not, no matter how mean or nice we've been to a friend or foe, God will show mercy upon us in the final judgment. "Mercy triumphs over judgment." (James 2:13)

But that doesn't mean, James tells us, that we can just go about our daily business not being nice to one another. James is one of the New Testament writers who makes the most of the idea that we can't have faith without works. Verse 14 of our text says, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?" Faith without works "is dead," according to James. (James 2:17) We can't say the words of faith about loving God and our neighbor and not walk the talk. We can't take God's love and mercy for us all for granted.

James tells us mercy is as mercy does. As we forgive others their trespasses, we are forgiven ours. As others are led not into temptation but delivered from evil, we also are led away from the cravings of the world and delivered into the goodness of God.... God's grace and mercy may be *freely given*, but they are not *cheap*; they are not without the command that we be merciful to others, as we would have them be merciful to us, as we would have God be merciful to us.

I found a wonderful quote recently by Helen Wodehouse that appeared in a book entitled *The Choice Is Always Ours* which was published in 1948, the year I was born! She wrote, "We think we must climb to a certain height of goodness before we can reach God. But God says *not* 'At the end of the way you may find me'; God says 'I am the Way; I am the road under your feet, the road that begins

just as low down as you happen to be.’ If we are in a hole the Way begins in the hole. The moment we set our face in the same direction as God’s, we are walking with God.”<sup>[1]</sup> Mercy is, or can be, our walking companion throughout our lives, even unto death because God is merciful, because Jesus came to respond to the needs of those who would cry out, “Jesus, son of God, have mercy on me!”

We get kind of stuck on the mercy point some days though, don’t we? I know there are days when I don’t feel very merciful at all. There are situations in which I don’t want to give someone else the benefit of the doubt regarding the cruel or thoughtless words they’ve spoken....

when I don’t want to forgive them their trespasses....

when I swear to myself I will not forget their obnoxious or insensitive behavior. I don’t like myself for feeling like this, but some days it’s like I can’t seem to help it. Mercy is not easy to *grant*, nor is it easy to *receive*.

One of the desert mothers or fathers of the 4<sup>th</sup> century put it like this, “Look, I am going to play the part of God and seat myself on the throne of judgment. What do you want me to do for you, then? If you say, ‘Have mercy on me’, God says to you, ‘If you want me to have mercy on you, do you also have mercy on your brother; if you want me to forgive you, do you also forgive your neighbor.’ Can there be injustice in God? Certainly not, but it depends on us whether we wish to be saved.... The prophets wrote books, then came our Fathers who put them into practice. Those who came after them learnt them by heart. Then came the present generation [remember this was written in the fourth century!], who have written them out and put them into their window seats without using them.”<sup>[2]</sup>

And isn’t that true even today, some 1,600 centuries after those words were first written? The Word of God sits in stillness in a lot of people’s window seats, even some of those who proclaim they are “good and devout Christians.” Sometimes I feel like it sits in *my* window seat while I get angry and feel hostile towards those who don’t agree with me or whose behavior I do not approve of. Yet, I then get upset with others who seem so prejudiced and narrow minded in their views. *Just who do I think I am?* There are times when I wonder how I got into this ministry gig. *My*mercilessness astounds me some days....

We live in a world in which mean-spiritedness, anger and hostility, prejudice and inequality, and incivility seem to run more rampant all the time.... or perhaps they don’t run more rampant than they did in the fourth century, we just hear about

their rampantness more often because of our instantaneous forms of communication.

Maybe mercy isn't in short supply nowadays, it's just been pushed into the back seat, the window seat, of a car driven by mercilessness human judgments, the lack of kindness and compassion that God would show us all. If only we would let God do that, if only we would let *God* be in the driver's seat rather than us.... but we can't seem to do that. "Let go, let God," is a wonderful saying.... But it's very, very hard to put into practice, isn't it?

We've all lost people from our midst for whom mercy was not just a word, but an action to be lived out in many ways. We've known of many people over the centuries for whom showing mercy was their life's work and passion – Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesus, for God's sake! And yet each of them had their own struggles with showing mercy. With humanness comes frailty. With humanness comes the cry for forgiveness, for mercy.

Yes, mercy implies compassion. Mercy triumphs over judgment. But, it's still not easy to give or receive. I brought a visual aid today that seems to be helping me out this week with my angst over mercy – the granting and the receiving of it. (put hour glass on the pulpit) This is an hour glass..... a very modern one! I couldn't find the traditional one I had for years but can't find now! What do you do when the sand in an hourglass runs out? (get responses) You turn it over and begin again. An hourglass reminds me that even when all the sands of mercy have drained out of me, I can turn it over and start again. God will give me another chance to be merciful to others, just as God is merciful to me.

In the Beatitudes of Jesus as they are given to us in the Gospel of Matthew, the fifth beatitude is "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." (Matt 5:7) Let us do what we can through our words, and in our actions and deeds this day, to show mercy to one another and so receive mercy from God. When the sand of our mercy filled hourglasses runs out, let's turn them over and start again.

Let the people say, "Amen."

**Federated Church in Thomaston**  
**United Church of Christ    United Methodist Church**  
**All Are Welcome**  
**Sunday, September 5, 2021**

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet, Pastor    Alice Billheimer, Organist/ Choir Director

Lector: Jackie Harjula

*Please be respectfully silent once our worship service has begun.*

*An asterisk (\*) indicates where you are invited to stand.*

***Bold print** indicates that the people speak these responses & prayers.*

## **GATHERING FOR WORSHIP**

### **Welcome and Announcements**

**Prelude** Faith of our Fathers -- based on the hymn tune "St. Catherine" interpreted by David H. Hegarty

### **Call to Worship**

Leader: God of surprise and awe, we come this day to you, the one who can turn our many doubts and fears around.

**People: Challenge our sure perspectives and unsettle our fixed opinions. We come seeking your instruction, longing to understand your mercy in our merciless world.**

**All: Above all, instill in us a vision for a new world and a re-creative way of living wholeheartedly within it. Let us worship God!**

**\*Opening Hymn** "Oh God, Our Help in Ages Past" 9 red Hymnal

### **An Invocation....**

**A Prayer of Confession** (see insert)

A Moment of Silence

## **SERVICE OF THE WORD**

**Scripture Reading** James 2:1-17

**\*Gloria Patri**

**Message** "mercy triumphs over judgment" Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

**\*Hymn of Meditation** "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" 272 red hymnal

## **RESPONDING IN FAITH**

**Sharing Our Joys and Concerns with God and Each Other**

**Pastoral Prayer & The Lord's Prayer....**

**Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.**

**Offertory** Cantabile (peaceful song) -- from Piano Concerto by Frederic Chopin

**\*Doxology No. 95 Blue**

**\*Prayer of Dedication**

**A Service of Holy Communion** (see insert)

**\*Closing Hymn** “God of Grace and God of Glory” 198 red hymnal

**Benediction**

**Postlude** Rejoice, the Lord is King!

**Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, September 12, 2021**

**Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38**

*“Mercies that are ordinary we swallow, and take small notice of them.”*

~ Anonymous

*“Mercy implies compassion that forebears punishing even when justice demands it.”*

~ Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 11 ed.

*“The quality of mercy is not strained; it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed – it blesseth the one that gives, and the one that takes.”*

~ William Shakespeare

**Prayer List** -- Hold in your prayers all those affected by the corona virus and the families of those who have died from the virus.... And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs and alcohol among their members.... And all those dealing with the ravages of cancer near and far..... And add a prayer for Frances Hernandez, recovering from brain surgery, Tammy Whirty, a friend of Margie’s, dealing with cancer challenges, and, from Blair, prayers for her friend Judith on the passing of her daughter, Lani, 42, from brain cancer, from Jackie a request for prayers for Kyle Cloudier, **and** continued deep prayers for Hank and Lucy as Hank endures his cancer journey with the help of Hospice, **and** continued prayers for Ursula recovering...and for “Cody,” who doesn’t live locally but needs prayers for guidance; **Kristin Parker O’Neal, Jo Ann Parker’s daughter, who has had brain surgery;** Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula Elliot, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, **Tiffany, Lucy’s granddaughter, and the Stetson family....**

*Please feel free to contact Susan by phone (207)322-1948 or by email [freerangepastor@gmail.com](mailto:freerangepastor@gmail.com) to add or drop the names from the prayer list AND to let her know if you would like for her to stop by for a visit sometime. She’s always glad to have a chat with you!*

**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Monday-9/6/21.....Labor Day

Sunday-9/12/21.....9:30 am: Worship Service

Suggested Food Pantry Donation..... Toilet Paper

The flowers this week are given by Pastor Susan Stonestreet and Nance Brown in memory of all the people who lost their lives on 9/11/2001.

Deacon for September: Corinne Ervin

Reminders for next Sunday,  
9/12/21

Greeter/Usher: Kay  
Sylvester  
Zwick  
Arlene Woodman

Lector: Gerry

Flowers:

Collection Total for Sunday, August 29, 2021:

Pledges -	\$1600.00
Loose -	\$ 269.00
Investment income - J P Morgan	\$ 72.90
Total -	\$1941.90

The 2021 weekly budgeted operating cost for the Church and parsonage is \$1623.00 per week.

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<sup>[1]</sup>Dorothy Berkeley Phillips, ed., *The Choice Is Always Ours*, New York: Richard R. Smith, 1948, p. 44, appears in *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol XII, New York: Abingdon Press, 1957, p. 46.

<sup>[2]</sup>In *The Doubleday Christian Quotation Collection*, compiled by Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild, New York: Doubleday, 1997, p. 17.