

“THE QUALITY OF MERCY”

Matthew 15:32, 20:29-34, 25:23; Mark 1:41, 6:36; Luke 6:32-36; 7:13; Ephesians 2:4

This is a sermon for Shylocks--so all who fail to come under that category may “fall out!”--the rest, “attention!” Ah--I see most of you are “at attention”--which is as it should be--for by and away the vast majority of us are a pack of Shylocks--and this sermon is for us. So pay attention.

You don't have to be a wicked old “Merchant of Venice” to be a Shylock, demanding his pound of flesh. You can be a Presbyterian of Durham--and be merciless and cruel. As a matter of fact, it's easy to be a ruthless old Shylock: just follow your natural inclinations--say to yourself, “I'm a pretty sharp cookie--I deserve what those suckers have got if I can get it--oh let 'em squawk--who cares? What's good for number one is what's good. Listen, buddy, what yours truly wants is what's right--so, get out of my way, or I'll run over you too!”

Such Shylocking sentiments--the church calls “original sin”. Not that when you think or act this way you are being very “original”--rather that you have fallen back into the most old fashioned, the most basic, the original Adamic track--of thinking you can play God and get away with it. When a man thinks he can thwart, twist, torture, toss aside as rubbish, his own life or the lives of other men for whatever kicks he gets out of it--he is deep in original sin--and farthest from the merciful God whose part he would ape. For a man without mercy is an “ape” indeed. He is no longer a man--much less a man of God. How grotesque then for him to parade around as though he were Providence! How passing strange--that when we try to play God, we always end up playing the devil.

To alter the speech of Portia: “Then must the (Presbyterian) be merciful”. That is to say: Surely, to goodness, anybody who calls himself a Presbyterian, “must be merciful”--must have something of the concern, a wee bit of the compassion of Jesus Christ in his heart, must have some of his Lord's loving kindness, his gentleness, must have some of his grace, his love for all the world, must have.....

“On what compulsion must I? Tell me that,” cuts in the old Shylock out of our sinful depths. How come? Why should I be merciful? “Tell me that”.

Whereupon, Portia, out of great familiarity with the word of God, the scripture of the old and the new testaments, tells him. She is a good expositor of the Bible. I shall use three of her points. Why be merciful? Why because:

- (1) "It is an attribute to God himself,"
- (2) "We do pray for mercy," (ourselves)
- (3) Therefore "Render the deeds of mercy." (to others)

(1) Certainly, one of the chief attributes of God in the Bible is his "mercy". 148 times in the Old Testament, it translates the Hebrew word, (^{Chesed} Hebrew word), "steadfast love" and indicates, not simply an amicable feeling on the part of God for his creation--not "I feel so, so sorry for you, you earth critters I created; you so poor and weak and stupid and sinful, I wish there were something I could do for you, but I just can't take time now, so 'mercy on you' ; I've got to get back to heaven; things are nicer there." No, not a bit of it. The "mercy" of God in the Old Testament is never a gush of affected sympathy--but always acts, deeds, by which he fulfills his covenant obligations to his people--out of duty and of love. In mercy He provides for them in the wilderness, gives them a land, protects them from harm, restores them unto himself: A thousand acts of Yahweh by which he faithfully maintains His covenant with His chosen people and proves Himself in history to be indeed "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

And in the New Testament, lent leads us straight to God's "mercy" which is, once again, always love in action not just pity on the part of God for people. It is mercy manifest in God's act of salvation through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:4) --how God, "...who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, did something for us we could never do for ourselves, made us alive together with Christ, and raised us up with him..." And "mercy" in the life of Jesus himself is ever more than an inner feeling; in the face of human suffering, he did not go around saying, "merciful goodness", or "mercy me", or "have mercy", but out of "mercy", He healed the blind (Matthew 20), "cleansed" the leper (Mark 1:42), "taught" the ignorant (Mark 6:36), "raised" the dead (Luke 7:13), "fed" the hungry (Matthew 15:32)--his mercy was action to make men whole again--to forgive their sin.

So Portia was right. Why be merciful? Because--for anyone in the Judaic - Christian heritage--"it is an attribute to God himself". We live under a merciful God-in-Christ--to whom...

(2) In the second place, "We do pray for mercy". Not one of us here is worthy of salvation. "By grace are ye saved"--we do not merit heaven because we are such jolly good fellows. No one here is going to heaven because he is good, but because God is good. No one here would dare shake his puny fist in the Almighty's face and say, "Give me my due!"--for fear of being struck dead and in hell. Shylocks like us--"miserable sinners"--so sick at the soul that we cannot see what perdition is being wrought by our pride and (.....), our greed and crookedness--lost as we obviously are--what claim have we on God --except to cry out to him--like the two blind men outside Jericho: "Lord, have mercy on us. Son of David!...Lord, let our eyes be opened."

Do you suppose we Presbyterians do not know that we are in need of the Lord's mercy? Do we think we already see things well enough--because we want to see things our own way--not His? Do we say instead: "Go along with you, Lord, get on to Jerusalem and hang yourself if you must, for we don't buy this 'take up your cross' and 'lose your life for my sake' bit; we'll just stay here and run Jericho as we see fit. Like we said, Lord, leave us alone". And if that's our attitude, he'll do just that. What else can he do--but leave us alone--and we won't be a Christian church any more. We'll just be "Dr. So and So's church"--or "Mr. So and So's church"--but we'll no longer be "the Church of Jesus Christ".

Only when we recognize our blindness and cry out in desperate need, "Lord, have mercy on us....let our eyes be opened." Only then can it be said of us: "And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they received their sight and followed him" (Matthew 20:29-34). Otherwise, we just blindly go around in circles here following each other.

Why mercy? Because--(1) "it is an attribute to God himself"--(2) to whom "we do pray for mercy." Therefore--

(3) In the third and final place--as Portia tried to explain to that soul-blind, that heart deaf, old boastful, originally sinful Shylock--it behooves each of us--who must pray ourselves for mercy to the God of mercy--to "render the deeds of mercy" to others.

As Jesus Christ said, "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful". That is the will of God. Peculiarly enough, I have often heard church people say, "Oh, how can you know the will of God? Do you have visions?" The answer if, "Of course, at least one vision every Christian must have: A vision of the Christ as we catch it through his words and works in

the New Testament. They become the will of God for us--us Christians, that is--for our eyes are opened by them and we who were blind now see." It takes a conversion, to be sure, to take His word and His work as the will of God; but once converted, we believe He meant it when He said things like, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them! And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same....But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." (Luke 6:32-36) That is "the will of God" for us!

That is a hard saying--and not to be kept by words alone--for "mercy" in the Old and New Testaments means "action"--or as Portia put it--"deeds". Not just saying "mercy sakes", "mercy me", or "have mercy"--in the face of human need--but doing something about it.

It's like this--we who are utterly at the mercy of the good God (who do you think will keep your heart beating through the coming night--or let it stop so that you suffocate? God's action alone). And we who are also at the mercy of our fellow man (who can possibly imagine that he is not constantly at the mercy of his fellow man? Without the acts of his fellows, a man is neither born, educated, sustained. Without the merciful help of our family, friends, country, world--who nourish us, put up with us--we who deserve precious little of it--without the concerted, creative action of all the rest--who are we? Nobody. Without them--where are we? (no where)--therefore--it behooves us--who are so fully and finally dependent upon the mercy of God and man to be merciful ourselves: To be forgiving as we must constantly be forgiven--forbearing, as others must bear with us--helpful, as we must every day be helped--good and gracious and kind and loving as we ourselves need love to make life worth living. Every now and then we church workers must stop and remind ourselves that the Lord Jesus is not so much interested in our "churchiness"--our boards and budgets--our programs and much talk--that with Him--it is not our "churchiness" that counts--but our character--for did he not say, "Woe to you (church people), scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe...but have neglected...justice and mercy and faith"? (Matthew 23:23) On the other hand--did not the Master--in his beatitudes--say "Blessed are the merciful (happy are those who add to the help of the world)--for they (and they alone) shall obtain mercy (from God and their fellow man).