

Kyrie eleison
Matthew 5:1-7
October 14, 2007

It's 1969. I'm in high school, and while most of my classmates are listening to Led Zeppelin or Janis Joplin or Jimi Hendrix, I'm listening to this:

(Play recording of the *Kyrie*, from J. S. Bach's *Mass in B Minor*.)

Anybody recognize the music? It's the *Kyrie* from Johann Sebastian Bach's *Mass in B Minor*. I think it's the first album I ever owned, and I especially enjoyed listening to the *Kyrie*. The text is two words: *kyrie eleison* ... Lord, have mercy. The *Kyrie* the first movement of the mass, the first movement of any mass, and one of the earliest expressions used regularly in Christian worship.

Kyrie eleison. Lord, have mercy.

It's a cry from the heart to God, a cry for help, a cry for forgiveness, a cry to be noticed, a cry to be treated with gentleness and tenderness.

It's a baring of the soul, throwing yourself on the Lord's mercy, counting on nothing, having nothing to offer, just crying out for mercy, asking the Lord to look on you with kindness, asking the Lord to take pity on you and treat you with compassion.

Kyrie eleison. Lord, have mercy!

And the Lord will ...

*The Lord is merciful and loving,
slow to become angry and full of constant love.
As a father is kind to his children,
so the Lord is kind to those who honor him.
The Lord knows what we are made of;
he remembers that we are dust. (Psalm 103)*

*The Lord's unfailing love and mercy still continue,
fresh as the morning, as sure as the sunrise. (Lamentations 3)*

*I, the Lord, am a God who is full of compassion and pity, who is not easily
angered and who shows great love and faithfulness. (Exodus 34)*

*Let us have confidence and approach God's throne where there is grace.
There we will receive mercy and find grace to help us just when we need it.
(Hebrews 4)*

That's what the Lord is like: full of mercy and compassion. And blessed -- blessed! -- are those who are like him! We are made in God's image and we are capable of the same impulses: kindness, tenderness, pity, compassion, love, mercy. Indeed this is what the Lord expects of us: *What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?* (Micah 6)

And Jesus says those who do -- those who love mercy, those who show mercy -- are blessed. It's a blessing, a word of comfort, a word of encouragement, not a command.

Jesus doesn't say: *Be merciful*. He says: *Blessed are those who are merciful*. Those of you who do show mercy, those of you whose hearts are tender to those around you, you are blessed. You will receive mercy!

Blessed are those who show mercy ...

If justice is blind, then mercy has its eyes wide open! Mercy always sees the person, that one particular person. Mercy is always personal. Mercy doesn't just apply the rule, mercy makes the exception, because it sees the person. Mercy sees the person and is moved. Mercy sees the person and is moved to action. You don't feel mercy. You do it!

Jesus saw the man, the man with a terrible skin disease, kneeling before him and begging him for help. Jesus saw him and his heart was filled with pity, and Jesus touched him, and Jesus healed him.

It reminds me of a favorite scene from the movie, *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, based on the life of St. Francis of Assisi. Francis and Clare minister to a group of lepers beside a woodland pool, singing them songs and bathing their bodies, giving them the precious gifts of music and human touch and friendship. They didn't only see the disease; they saw the people.

My mother-in-law is in Missouri this weekend. She flew from Michigan's Upper Peninsula to Missouri on an errand of mercy. She heard that an old friend, an elderly woman who was a member of her church forty years ago, had been in an accident and she went to Missouri to be with her and offer her companionship and encouragement, since the woman had no relatives. Mercy is always personal.

Our participation in the Nicaraguan shoebox project is an errand of mercy. Our involvement with that project and the involvement of the Waterloo community with that project begun with one broken heart. One man heard of the children in Chinandega surviving by browsing the dump and his heart was broken and he was moved to pity and he responded in mercy. Mercy is always personal.

Those of you who mentor students in the Waterloo school system do so out of mercy. You believe in supporting education. You believe in doing community service. But mostly, isn't it true that you care about him, you care about her, that one you see and spend time with each week? Mercy is always personal.

Today we celebrate the beginning of a new congregational ministry, a new health ministry headed up by a parish nurse. Nurses have often been called angels of mercy and the name fits. Not in every case, but in many cases, it fits! You can tell your own stories, as I can, about the ways a nurse made a dehumanizing situation more human, a demoralizing situation more tolerable, a depressing situation more hopeful. And that's what parish nursing is about, too. It's about education. It's about resourcing and referral. But mostly it's about mercy, about seeing people, seeing these people, and giving help for their particular needs. It's about showing mercy, and we sure have the right person for that!

It's about mercy, and that's why I am so much against torture in any form. I'm against torture because it violates international treaties and conventions. I'm against torture because it betrays our national legacy and because it ignores our core values and because it does irreparable harm to our international reputation. But mostly I'm

against torture because it fails to show mercy, because it fails to see the person, because it acts cruelly, heartlessly, and entirely without mercy. We need to see it and not turn our backs on it. We need to see the people who are tortured, and say, *No more!* We need to show mercy.

Thank God for merciful people! Thank God for people whose hearts are moved by suffering! Thank God for people of tender heart! Jesus says they are blessed. Jesus says they will receive mercy.

And at least some of the blessing comes with mercy itself. When you personalize a situation, you become personalized. When you look into their faces, they see your face. When you treat people humanly, humanely, you become more human yourself. And when you show mercy, you become more and more like the One who shows you mercy.

So, you who are merciful, you who are compassionate, you who do have tender hearts. Jesus sees you and Jesus knows your hearts and Jesus says you are blessed!