

Sermon: Mercy me!  
14 Pentecost, Year B

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For any of us who read or listen to the news through our various devices, it is easy to see how we the viewers are so often encouraged to focus on the divisions in our country. Many of our news sources aim to pit us against one another, to enflame rancor toward those who do not think or feel the way we do. It is sometimes tempting to put up walls against those who are different from us. You have heard, no doubt, the word *polarization* ad nauseum and may have even begun to believe that hope of unity in our country is just a fanciful notion. Where is God in the midst of our apparent division?

Our collect for today offers us some direction: *Grant, O Merciful God, your Church, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all peoples, to the glory of your Name, (through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.) Amen.*

Here God is addressed as *merciful*. So what does it mean to be merciful? When I hear the word mercy, sometimes I picture a teen aged boy twisting the arm of his younger brother until he yells out "Mercy!" much the way he might cry "uncle!" resulting in relief and freedom from the intensity of pain. One definition I heard this summer while I was on my 8 day Ignatian retreat was that mercy is the *willingness to enter another person's chaos, turmoil, pain, mess or sorrow*. That is indeed what God does. You may remember from Genesis, our first book in the Bible, the primordial state of creation was a dark, watery chaos and the wind or Spirit swept over it to create something new. And the Spirit brought the chaos to order. John's Gospel passage today tells us that Jesus came to dwell with us to bring us life. Jesus came to abide in us not because life was perfect but because life was (and is) messy. Jesus came to us as an act of mercy.

In Ray Hinton's recently published book *The Sun Does Shine*, he recounts spending 30 years on death row serving time for two murders he did not commit. He had grown up in poverty as a black boy in Alabama. One day as he was mowing the grass at his mother's house he was arrested for these crimes. His mother had instilled in him a strong Christian faith and he prayed at every step of the way, knowing and believing God would save him from this injustice. And yet he landed on death row after all was said and done. He was given a Bible which he put under his bed, never to pick it up for three years. His anger, hurt and despair so engulfed him, he couldn't pray, nor did he talk to anyone except during occasional visits from his friend Lester and his mother.

On death row, Hinton was isolated in a single cell along a hallway with other death row inmates, enclosed in a small space all day except for 15 minutes for exercise. And his cell was just feet away from the execution chamber where inmates died regularly by the electric chair. Fear and despair on that hall were palpable. But one day Hinton heard another inmate crying. He had heard inmates crying before. He himself cried often. But something was different that day. Unable to see the other inmate, he yelled out, "*Hey! Are you all right over there?*" *At first*

*he got no response. But he called out again, "Is something wrong?" And then he got the response, "I just...I just got word that my mom died." Hinton writes, "I can't describe exactly what it is to have your heart break open but in that moment my heart broke open and I wasn't a convicted killer on death row; I was Anthony Ray Hinton from Praco. I was my mama's son, "I'm sorry man. I really am." And then I heard another guy yell from down below me, "Sorry for your loss." And then another from the left side of me yelled "Sorry man. Rest in peace." Nobody else was talking before that but they had been listening, too, How could you not hear him crying? I didn't have to think about people all around the world sitting on the edge of their beds and crying when there were two hundred men all around me who didn't sleep, just like me. Who were in fear, just like me. Who wept just like all of us. Who felt alone and afraid and without hope.*

*I had a choice to reach out to these men or to stay in the dark alone. I walked over to my bed and got down on my hands and knees. I reached my arm under the bed and felt around through the dust and dirt until the tips of my fingers brushed against my Bible. It had been under there for too long. This man had lost his mom, but I still had mine, and she wouldn't care for my Bible to be collecting filth. Even here I could still be me. I walked back up to the cell door.*

*"Listen!" I yelled, "God may sit high but he looks low. He's looking down here in the pit. He's sitting high but he's looking low. You've got to believe it." I had to believe it too.<sup>1</sup>*

He proceeded to have the man tell him all about his mother. Hinton had chosen to be merciful, to enter this man's sorrow and turmoil. And he knew that God had chosen to be in the pit with him, to enter his own chaos and turmoil of an innocent man on death row. And in that act of mercy, death row was transformed. Hinton's act of mercy awakened mercy in some of the other inmates as well. That is not to say there weren't people there who hadn't committed some heinous crimes. But God chose to be there, even there, in one of the darkest places of despair.

Can you think of a time when someone was merciful to you, when you were in the pit of despair? Maybe someone relieved your financial burden out of the blue, or sat with you when your mother died or called you when you were going through a divorce or didn't give up on you when you fell off the wagon of your addiction? Where do you see pain or chaos, sorrow or turmoil now? If you begin to really get to know someone, you will know there is plenty of pain, plenty of chaos, plenty of sorrow in this room and in this world. There is a prayer in our Rite I Eucharist service called the Prayer of Humble Access. It begins, "God, whose property is always to have mercy..." It is in God's character to always be merciful. In whatever turmoil or chaos or pain we might experience, God is there with us. And when we choose to be merciful to others, that is God at work in and through us.

Where is God nudging you to enter the pit, to enter the chaos or pain of another and offer God's healing light? How will you respond to God's nudge? Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Hinton, Anthony Ray, *The Sun Does Shine*, St. Martin's Press, 2018, p.115-117.

