The whole point of the Christian life is to reproduced the character of Jesus in the lives of God‘s people, and that means cultivating a community of brothers and sisters who have compassionate hearts and who act for the good of others. This is central to our calling as Christians. What God requires of us is “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with God” (Micah 6:8). Which is why, to some religious leaders who misunderstood what God requires of us, Jesus said, “Go and earn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice’” (Matt. 9:13). When we learn to show mercy it will make a huge difference in our work, our church, and our home life.

I can think of seven opportunities for showing mercy. The first is pretty obvious: when we **cross paths with** **someone who has a material need**. In this case, mercy is getting down on our hands and knees and doing something to restore the dignity to someone whose life is broken. It is the opportunity to reflect God’s likeness by showing mercy.

The second opportunity for showing mercy comes when we **encounter a** **fellow Christian who is struggling in his or her walk with God**. When Jude says, “Have mercy on those who doubt” (Jude 22), he reminds us that when a brother or sister in Christ is plagued with unanswered questions, their greatest need is the kindness and compassion of a believing friend who will come alongside to support and strengthen them in their faith.

A third opportunity to show mercy comes when **someone fails in a way that might bring them shame and embarrassment**. “Love covers a multitude of sins,” the apostle Peter wrote (1 Peter 4:8). A hard heart always makes a big deal of another person’s failure, but a merciful heart will turn a blind eye and a deaf ear. Sin should always be called out and corrected, but the purpose must be for restoring a relationship. God does not treat us as our sins deserve: God’s love covers a multitude of our sins.

A fourth opportunity for showing mercy is in **how we treat a juicy piece of gossip**. The Devil is the father of lies (John 8:44), manufacturing rumors to make us think less of our neighbors. A merciful person will close his or her ears to anything that would diminish their view of someone else.

A fifth way to show mercy is by **having reasonable expectations**. People, by their fragile nature, will disappoint us and let us down, just as we will often disappoint others and fail them. God knows that we are fickle, fallible creatures and God loves us anyway. We need to extend that same grace to the people around us.

A sixth opportunity to show mercy comes when **someone hurts or wrongs us**. Joseph’s brothers wronged him terribly, attacking him and selling him into slavery; but God blessed him, and he became the prime minister of Egypt. When his brothers needed food, they came to Egypt and Joseph had them in his power. God orchestrated events in Joseph’s life so that he had the opportunity to get even or to forgive. Joseph chose to forgive his brothers. That’s what mercy does. If you have been wounded by another person, don’t be surprised if God puts you in a position where you have the opportunity to pay them back.

A seventh way to show mercy relates to **sharing the Gospel** with someone who needs to hear God’s words of hope and love and mercy and forgiveness. A tender heart that cares and acts for the good of others will care deeply about people who do not know God’s love and grace and mercy and forgiveness, and will act by sharing the gospel with them.

Put these seven situations together and we see just how often we’ll have the opportunity to show mercy, and mercy is a stepping stone to forgiveness. Pursuing mercy will bring us to a place where we are ready and able to forgive.

Scripture shows us that there are three times when God forgives. First, forgiveness is only appropriate and it is only meaningful **when a wrong is done**. When God forgives us, it means that we have wronged God. Every sin in life is a personal offense against God, because it harms some part of God’s creation. Saul of Tarsus persecuted Christians, but when Jesus appeared to him, he said, “Saul, why do you persecute me?” David captured the same truth in Psalm 51, confessing his adultery to God, saying, “Against you, and you only, have I sinned” (v. 4). God is the One to whom we must ultimately give account. God is the One from whom we most need to receive forgiveness.

Second, God forgives **when repentance begins**. In the story of the prodigal son, the younger son leaves in open rebellion, but later comes to his senses and begins the long journey home. He doesn’t expect much welcome from his father, but hopes for some menial work, a little food, and a roof over his head. The father sees the son from a distance and rather than wait, runs out to meet him. This pictures the wonderful truth that God forgives when repentance begins. When someone wrongs us and then begins to repent, we should move toward them with love and forgiveness. We cannot wait until every aspect of the offense is rectified. Like God, we must decide to forgive, not at the end, but at the beginning of repentance.

Lastly, God forgives where a wrong is done and when repentance begins, **because** **atonement has been made**. Think of how extraordinarily difficult it is for God to forgive. When creating the world, all God had to do was speak it into existence: “’Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). But when it came to forgiveness, God could not simply say, “Let them be forgiven.” It took God entering our world, taking on human flesh, living a perfect life, shedding God’s own blood, and laying down God’s life on the cross. God forgives where a wrong is done, when repentance begins, because atonement is made.

So, how do we get ourselves to a place where we can forgive others, as God in God’s great mercy, forgives us? We’ve been using the analogy of gymnastic rings to explain our progress through the Beatitudes: as we grasp each ring, our momentum propels us through to the next ring. I want to change up the metaphor a little, this morning, and ask you to think of hurdles in a race. You can’t jump over a hurdle from a standing position: you have to begin further back and get a running start, gain some momentum in order to clear the hurdle. So, let me give you six strides that will help you clear the hurdles and get you to forgiveness.

* Remember that the Holy Spirit lives in you, convincing you that God forgives you and helping you to extend forgiveness to others.
* Stop dwelling on the injury, let go of the anger and bitterness, and ask God to give you a heart of tenderness.
* Don’t fight or quarrel because dwelling on the wrong feeds the battle and gets in the way of forgiveness, stealing your momentum.
* Realize that you need the forgiveness too! No matter how far you progress in the Christian life, you will always be in the position of saying, “Lord, have mercy on me.”
* Cherish the forgiveness God offers you in Jesus. You didn’t deserve it or earn it, but God offered it willingly, gladly, to restore your relationship with God.

Practicing these six strides will take you over the hurdles leading to forgiveness, restoring relationships, just as we are restored in our relationship with God.

Prayer: Lord, enable me to slow down and remember You and the richness of Your mercy towards me. Today I offer you my hurts, anger, bitterness, and disappointments. Enable me to forgive as generously and consistently as You forgive me. Teach me how to appropriately process any anger toward You, others and myself. I wait on Your Spirit and trust in You, Lord. Show me the way of Your wisdom and love this day. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen

Source: Colin S. Smith, Momentum: *Pursuing God’s Blessings Through the Beatitudes*. Moody Publishers: Chicago, IL. 2016.

**Care About Others**

Sunday, October 15, 2017 Matthew 5:7

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Today we explore the twin virtues of mercy and forgiveness. Mercy is broader than forgiveness, but forgiveness goes further than mercy. Here’s what I mean. Suppose someone wrongs you. To be merciful means that you have compassion on that person, and rather than return harm, you seek to do them good. Mercy chooses not to repay evil for evil, but rather, to “overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21). But forgiveness goes further because it involves restoring a relationship. In a sense, mercy is the stepping stone to forgiveness: pursue mercy and you will get to forgiveness.

According to Jesus, mercy has two parts. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a good example. First, there is tenderness of heart: when the Samaritan saw the man lying in the road he had compassion. Second, there is action that arises from a compassionate heart: the Samaritan went to the man and bound up his wounds and helped him. Mercy is compassion that leads to action. Mercy is being moved to change the plight of another.

When God appeared to Moses at Sinai, God revealed God’s Self in a fourfold description that is repeated no less than seven times in the Old Testament: “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love” (Ex. 34:6). Mercy is at the heart of who God is: God is tender hearted, and out of God’s compassion, God acts for our good.

The mercy of Jesus is on display throughout the Gospels. Jesus warned that Peter would deny him three times (John 13:38); he also prayed that Peter’s faith would not fail (Luke 22:31). Although Peter failed in his testimony, his real faith showed in the fact that he could not live with his denial of Jesus. Peter’s faith produced repentance. After the resurrection, when Jesus showed himself the disciples, he asked Peter three times, “Do you love me?” Peter answered, “Lord, you know that I love you” (John21:15-17). By this, Jesus restored the relationship with Peter. Mercy means that our failure need never be the last word.

Earlier Jesus demonstrated mercy to Thomas who had unanswered questions and some serious doubts. Thomas told the other disciples, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails…I will never believe.” But Jesus did not let Thomas go: he appeared to Thomas, saying, “put your finger here, and see my hands…do not doubt, just believe” (John 20:25, 27). Mercy means that our doubts and questions need never be the last word.