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Sunday, March 7th - 3rd Sunday of Lent

“Mercy, Me!”

When I a child growing up in the 60’s my grandma used to use a phrase: Mercy, Me! I didn’t know what the literal meaning was. But in the context it meant that something unfortunate had happened. If the toast popped up burnt, “Mercy, Me!” would follow. Or if the neighbor came over to to tell about a cat who was hit on their semi-busy street, Mercy Me! would follow. Or if the TV news reporting on the war in Vietnam, a “Mercy, Me!” might be heard. On occasion, when the news was really bad, “mercy Me! Was replaced with “Lord, have mercy.” But here’s a confession: I didn’t know what mercy was. It was not a term that was regularly used in my home. And when it was used at church, I didn’t “get it.” I knew the word, but I didn’t understand it. What I did understand from the various outbursts of my religious grandmother was

- 1) the Lord gave it and
- 2) it was for Me!

I’ve been thinking a lot about mercy lately. Partly because there are so many painful and sobering things going on in our world. This week I received word that a 20 year old who is a close family friend of one of our Iranian partners was sentenced to death for throwing stones at a rally in January. Earlier this week, his death sentence was upheld. He could be executed any day. His family and friends are devastated. Even the police who handed him in are trying to get him released - they had no idea he would be killed. He is

a nice kid. Religious leaders are trying to keep him from getting killed. This is really heavy stuff. And the only words I can find to say are, “Lord, have mercy.”

Les spent three weeks in Israel and Palestine in November and December. He came back with pain-filled stories of houses being demolished and of centuries old olive orchards being cut down by Israeli settlers and of parents grieving for their children who have been murdered. And so much of this is happening supported by the church in the West. And I shake my head and say, “Lord, have mercy.”

And recently MCC has expanded its work in the Sudan and, as a result we have heard pain-filled stories. One story told of an MCC staff member coming late to work because his neighbor was shot in his home the night before - and the MCC staff person had to hide in the yard for the remainder of the night as the robbers rummaged through his house. And I am lost for words so I say, “Lord have mercy.”

Don't get me wrong. The Mennonite Central Committee is a great organization to work for. When there are disasters, we are energized by being able to DO something. And this is a very good thing. But one of the challenges in working with MCC is that for every story of hope, there are countless stories of struggle, of pain, of suffering.

The week of the earthquake in Haiti I was particularly moved by the story of two MCCers in Port-a-Prince. Joel and Rachel Hoffman were in their 5th story apartment on the afternoon of January 12th. Rachel was getting ready

to go out for a run so was in the process of getting dressed in her running clothes. Joel was getting ready to get in the shower after a hot day working in the dusty city of Port-au-Prince and was in his boxers. Then the earth shook and their lives were changed. Responding to the childhood refrain of, “When there’s an earthquake, get to a door frame,” they both huddled under the sturdy frame of their front door, five stories high. Rachel put her hand up to protect her head and a piece of the wall came down, cutting her arm. Joel didn’t put his arm up and got a nasty, deep gash on his head. And then everything went dark. When the dust settled they were surrounded by rubble in pitch darkness. Then Joel saw a spot of light. Laboriously they crawled across the chunks of concrete block toward the light. At some point they realized that they were no longer on the fifth floor. They were on the street. They were crawling on asphalt. When they finally made their way to the light, they dug their way out witnessing destruction all around them. Their apartment complex housed 60 people. But very few were on the street. Someone pulled another expatriate out of the rubble and told Joel and Rachel to take care of her. So the three made their way, in shock through the streets of Port-au-Prince. A Haitian gave Rachel a sweater so she would not have to walk through the street cold and without much on. Joel was losing blood. But they kept on. Eventually they made it to the embassy. Joel needed to be sewn up. Apparently the gash was very deep. And somehow they ended up on a plane back to the US.

I found myself singing, “Longing for light, we wait in darkness. Longing for hope, many despair. Christ be our light, shine in our hearts, shine in our darkness...” [“Longing for Light” # 54, *Sing the Journey*, Faith and Life Resources, Mennonite Publishing Network 2005]. And I celebrated the very

real way that it was as if Christ WAS their light, leading them from darkness and death, to life. And then I realized that while the story for Joel and Rachel ended in life - it is a story of hope -- the story for most of their neighbors ended differently. Out of the 60 people who lived in their building, it is thought that 5 or 6 survived. And all I could say was Lord, have mercy.

I cannot fathom the loss. I cannot fathom the pain. I cannot fathom the suffering.

And when we cannot make sense of the suffering, there is a human tendency to look for someone to blame. This happened right away after the Haiti earthquake. Pat Robinson made the headlines by stating that this earthquake was the result of Haiti making a pact with the devil. And while this “explanation” of why the earthquake happened neglects to take a thoughtful look at Haiti’s history or at the roots of poverty in this island country so near our shores, it is also very bad theology.

Luke 13:1-9

A large crowd was gathered around Jesus as he was teaching and someone told Jesus about Pilate’s cruelty toward Galilean pilgrims in Jerusalem. Pilate not only killed the Galileans, but he mixed their blood with their sacrifices. The disciples must have said in a tone of voice that made Jesus think it was really the Galilean’s fault- or at least that his followers were seriously lacking in compassion - because Jesus responded, “Do you think because the Galileans suffered in this way that they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? Let me just remind you: Unless YOU repent, you will

all perish as they did.” He went on to point out that those who suffered from the random act of a wall falling on them were no worse sinners than anyone else. And again, he reiterated: “Unless YOU repent - that is change your ways - you will all perish just as they did.”

And Jesus went on to tell a parable: A man planted a fig tree in his vineyard. And for three years he came looking for fruit - but there wasn't any. In frustration, he told the gardener to cut it down - because it's using up useful space and soil. But the gardener, aware of the need to nurture new life from the otherwise barren plant said, “Well.....how about we wait one more year. And I'll dig around it and put extra manure on it and nurture it a bit. We'll just give it one more chance: and if it bears fruit next year, great. And if it doesn't....well, then you can cut it down if you still want to.

The mercy that Jesus suggests here - that comes in the form of a little manure, a little water, a little patience and some tender care - is mercy....offered to me.

Jesus gradually shifts the focus of the attention away from blaming “the other” (in this case Galileans) back to the individual who would be inclined to point the finger. And Jesus says, YOU - change your ways. YOU - bear some fruit. Yes, I am merciful. Yes, I give you second chances. In spite of the fact that your fig tree isn't doin' so hot. So YOU change. Turn YOUR orientation toward God and move in the direction of life. I am offering YOU mercy this day.

So where does this passage end? It seems to end **with a bit of hope - and a good measure of compassion.**

When there is suffering in the world, it is not the time to point fingers, it is time to look at ourselves and ask, “Now how might Jesus enable me to bear fruit in this situation?” How might I change my ways (or repent) and turn to God?

The Haitian Christians modeled this right away after the earthquake. With suffering all around them, they gathered together....and they sang their hearts out: in praise to God, in thanksgiving for those who survived, in lament for those who had perished. In their suffering they turned to God - and then they turned to each other and started rebuilding each others homes. They didn't have much. They often didn't have enough.

So what about we, who look on from a distance? Are we willing to change? To repent and turn to God along with our Haitian brothers and sisters? I dare say some among us have done just that.

Some are changing there lifestyles - and choosing to forgo their regular \$5 latte so that once a week they have enough money to purchase the items of a Relief Kit [see mcc.org for details].

Some have said, “What I can do in support of those who are suffering in Haiti is more important to me than buying a new car this year. So I will give the money I would have spent on a car to support rebuilding.”

Some have said, “I am ready to give lots of my time to coordinating the collection of relief kits for the next month. I will change my priorities for the month and devote my time to this project.”

Some have said, “I will take time off from my job and go to Haiti on a medical team or as a structural engineer or to be a part of a long term assessment team.”

And some folks who are a part of the broader Mennonite Disabilities community in our area decided to tithe the proceeds from their Passion Play and use \$300 to purchase supplies for Relief Kits. With tears in her eyes, one of the members of the Passion Play cast said, “I just want to go down there and give them all a hug. But I guess these kits will have to be the hug for me.”

And some have said, “I’m not planning on going anywhere, but I will pray. And I will commit myself to being open to where God leads me and to doing what God leads me to do.”

So where might we end, if we look at how God might choose to use us? Mercifully - as recipients of the mercy that God offers to us - we may just get to the same place that Jesus gets to at the end of this passage: To a place where we may live **with a bit of hope and a good dose of compassion.**

May God be merciful to us, and to all whom God has created.