

Mercy Me, Micah

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It is so good to be here again on a Sunday morning. It feels like it has been a long time. We had relatives visit us for the holidays; my mother and father in law as well as my sister in law. I like to tease my sister in law. I never had an older sister growing up, so she is sort of a surrogate. Of course Santa Claus came to visit my house, including our house guests who also hung their stockings. I thought it would be funny to get some charcoal briquettes and put them in a plastic bag and put them in my sister in law's stocking. She is far far from being on the naughty list, so this would be quite the surprise! But my wife, who often talks me out of my juvenile mischief, prevailed upon me not to prank her sister on Christmas morning. Thus everyone's stocking remained coal free, including mine.

However this did get me to thinking about the possibility that Santa might leave you a lump of coal or a stick rather than toys if you were bad that year. Now being a parent I can appreciate the value of the empty threat. Just the fear that it might happen could scare straight a

naughty child, if only temporarily. Even a month's respite during the holidays could be enough. But has anyone ever actually done it; leave coal in some poor kid's stocking? Is Santa really so mean, so punitive, as to hold all our trespasses against us? That is quite an absolutist moral code: naughty and nice and no middle ground. Perhaps it is the bleeding heart Universalist in me, but that form of judgment, that justice is doled out in equal measures of toys or coal depending on your actions, seems cruel. Particularly so when children are unable to grasp anything other than their immediate circumstances. I hope that coal in the stocking is only an empty threat.

Because you see my message today is that mercy must temper justice. The Old Testament prophet Micah famously asked the rhetorical question, "What does the Lord require of you other than to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?" Justice is important, don't get me wrong I am all for it, but justice by itself is like a coal-giving Santa Claus; highly judgmental, never taking into account circumstances, and seemingly lacking in basic human empathy. With justice must come mercy. Mercy is the sympathetic understanding that spiritual maturity and wisdom bring to us.

Thus we see this was Jesus' lesson to the Pharisees. They catch him breaking a rule. Now to the Pharisees, the rules are pretty important. In fact they are pretty much the foundation of the Jewish religion in the Temple period. The whole Pharisee gig was pretty much

interpreting and enforcing Jewish law. So when Jesus and the disciples are caught harvesting grain on the Sabbath they have been caught breaking the law. And not just any law, but a big one, one of the Ten Commandments: you shall honor the Sabbath and keep it Holy by resting as God did on the seventh day.

Jesus responds to this accusation with some interesting rhetoric. First he points out that there are known exceptions to the rules. He out Pharisees the Pharisees. And he sort of ends up by pulling rank on them, “I am Lord of the Sabbath.” Comments like that won’t win you any friends and pretty much get you crucified. But in the middle of his response, rather cryptically stated, is that “mercy is greater than sacrifice.” His point being that the rules in the Torah about how to perform a sacrifice in the temple are not the most important rules. The teachings about mercy and compassion and healing the weak of society, those are the really important rules to follow. Mercy is a gift we receive even when we don’t deserve it.

When I lived in Chapel Hill North Carolina I got to know a fellow on my intern committee named Chuck. Chuck was a retired Methodist minister and psychologist. Once we were having dinner he told me a story about his graduate school days at University of North Carolina. Chuck was a teaching assistant in an intro to psychology class. It was one of those huge lecture courses that held two or three hundred freshmen and sophomores at a time. One day the professor asked Chuck

if he would fill in giving the lecture. So the day arrived when Chuck was to deliver his lecture only a funny thing happened. He overslept. He overslept the entire lecture; didn't even think about it until an hour or so after it was over.

Of course Chuck was mortified. He could not believe that he had been that stupid and had disappointed his professor so profoundly. But being a responsible person, he immediately went up to the office to see his boss and face the music. He sits down in front of his professor and comes clean; tells him the whole story without excuses. The professor listens, and at the end laughs. He turns to Chuck and says, "It's hard being human, isn't it?"

When we are in that place that Chuck was in when we need to ask someone else for mercy, all of our soft spots and vulnerabilities are exposed. We don't like that. No one likes having to acknowledge to another person their own failures; how we may have angered or disappointed someone. And yet it is precisely the fact that we have limitations, that we are not omnipotent or omniscient (all powerful and all knowing), that makes us human beings. All animals and living things are similarly limited of course, but so far as we know animals don't have to admit it to each other. Humans do. We ask for, and in our best moments give, mercy.

Of course this has happened to me as well. I think I have mentioned before my recurring nightmare that there is a paper due that I have not written. Now it is a sermon, but as a student it was essays. I was an Anthropology major in college, and one of the requirements was a course in Biological Anthropology. Now as you might guess, Bio-Anthropology was not the branch of that discipline that I was the most interested in. It concerned primarily how the human body has undergone evolution and is capable of adaptation. All in all it was not a bad course, but by no means my favorite. I did what I needed to do, finished off my sophomore year, and started looking for a summer job.

That summer I got my grades back from the previous semester to find that I had received a “D” in Bio-Anthropology. “What the heck happened?” Actually those were not my exact words upon opening up the envelope, but that was the spirit of what I said. I thought I had done actually pretty well for a subject that was frankly very dry. This made no sense. I felt impending doom descend upon me. It was not so much the hit to my grade point average; although I might have cited that as the main concern at the time. Now I think what mortified me was the blow to my self-confidence. I had a sense of who I was and how well I performed. This threw that entire perception out of whack. It was as if I didn’t understand myself as well as I had thought, and that is a very disconcerting feeling no matter how you arrive at it.

I immediately called the University and set up a meeting with the professor. She graciously met with me and reviewed her records. “Well,” she said, “It appears that I never received your final essay. You got a zero for the biggest part of your grade.” Impossible. I knew I had written this paper and had turned it in on the right date. We went back to the outer offices and found it: in the wrong professor’s box. Graciously, she decided to accept my final essay since I had turned it in on time, and gave me a B+ for the class. Oh, the sweet relief of mercy given and received!

I think one of the things about mercy that we inherently don’t like is that it creates an unequal relationship. The person giving mercy has power over the person getting mercy, if only for a brief time. If I am asking you for mercy, then I am exposing one of my vulnerable places to you. I am admitting my limitation. No wonder Micah has three things we must practice, justice, mercy and humility. If you are to ask for mercy and be vulnerable to another person; what else can you do but be humble. Humble is what you are when you ask for mercy. Mercy asks that we set aside ego and acknowledge reality. That is never ever fun. Ego is fun. The illusion that I am in control over my life and I know what the right thing to do in all circumstances—that is fun. That feels good. Humbly walking with my God; not really so much. That is why a prophet has to tell us this.

A big part of that humility, though is not just asking for mercy from others, but being quick to give it out too. If you have had that humbling experience, then you know what it is like when someone else asks you for mercy. Empathy and compassion are the unexpected gifts that come to us through mercy. I call this: Pay it forward. The relationship is unequal; you can't often give mercy back to the person who granted it to you. But you can be swift to grant mercy when you are in the powerful end of the relationship.

I had my opportunity about ten years after the missing essay incident. I was about two or three years into my ministry; really putting my B+ in Bio-Anthropology to work as a UU minister. It was during that time that one day I received a call from the secretary of the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, or MFC as it is often called.

I will not bore you with the process of how one becomes a Unitarian Universalist minister, but there are a few key facts to know. The MFC, the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, is the gatekeeper. They tell you whether or not you have cleared the bar and have the qualities we expect of a UU minister. They make this decision approximately around the time one graduates from seminary, or a year before. After that, the minister is required to turn in an annual evaluation to the MFC so that they can make sure that you are still up to snuff. After three years, if the evaluations have gone well, then one is

granted final fellowship, sort of like tenure in a university, and then you are good to go.

I had just mailed to the MFC my second renewal application. The secretary on the phone told me that one of the members of the Committee is in charge of reviewing these applications and facilitating the discussion among all the big wigs who make the decision. Unfortunately the person who was charged with this responsibility forgot to bring all of the applications to the meeting they were having in San Francisco. My application was in Seattle. It would be six months at least until the Committee would see it. The secretary apologized profusely on behalf of the person, whom she never named, and the MFC as a whole.

Well I told her: “So the application that took my Board and me over a month to complete and send out to you, which is a very strict deadline, is languishing hundreds of miles away from where it should be because someone on the Committee forgot it. You tell them from me, ‘It’s hard being human, isn’t it?’” My karma had come full circle!

Rev. Ken Phifer writes: “We should also love mercy. We should be understanding towards our fellow humans. We should reach out in kindness to those who are suffering. We should reach out in kindness to those who are in pain. We should not let our own troubles and burdens

blind us to the fact that others carry heavy loads as well. No person is free from heartache. No one is able to go it alone all the time.”

Indeed we cannot go it alone in life. If we are to grow spiritually, emotionally, relationally, and morally we need to be in community with other people. If mercy is shown to us, then we must show it in return. This cannot be done in theory, by reading about the philosophy of mercy or the biblical criticism of the prophet Micah. It can only be done in living breathing relationships with other fallible human beings. When people hurt us, we are given the opportunity to practice mercy. When we hurt others, we give them the same opportunity for spiritual growth and practice. This is an interesting way of looking at things, that I invite you to try out for yourself. When someone wrongs you and in that brief precious moment just before you tear their head off for being an insensitive fool, try this: say to yourself, this is an opportunity to practice compassion and empathy. It is a brief window in which I can love mercy.

Make no mistake; this is a very difficult spiritual practice. But if you can do it, then you will grow immensely. Practicing mercy opens our heart and mind to the suffering of others because we too have been in their place. And I use the word practice here in a very literal sense. We need a safe environment to practice hitting that small window of compassion before we blindly react to others. We need a place where we understand ourselves to be connected in a special kind of relationship

that will endure disagreement and the inevitable manifestation of our human finitude. In other words when we mess up and hurt people when we don't mean to. If we have that foundation, then we have found a special community where we can practice things like mercy and compassion and forgiveness. We can receive things like grace, and understanding and deep wisdom. That kind of environment is called the Beloved Community and the relationship that forms its foundation is called covenant. We recite these values every week in our Unison Affirmation. They are ideals; admittedly we don't live up to them perfectly every day as we should. It's hard being human, isn't it? But a big part of what it means to be a fallible human being, and in particular that sub-species of fallible human being called "Unitarian Universalist", is that even when we fail and fall short we keep that ideal alive before us so that we do not lose our way or forget who we are and what we are all about. May we be merciful to each other in our failing and falling. And may we grow together and we pick each other up and dust ourselves off. Amen Blessed Be.