



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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LET ME SAY THAT AGAIN. . . **BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL**

Scripture: Micah 6:8

Galatians 5:13-14 & 6:9-10

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INTRODUCTION

We're looking at our *core values* as a church—the church that God had in mind. Last year, Matt preached a sermon entitled “*Throwing in the Towel*” based on Philippians 2:5-8. It's a passage which urges us to have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

And what might that be? Paul spells it out:

“Jesus was in very nature God. But he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped (held on to). Without ceasing to be God, he became a human being—the man called Jesus. And in so doing took on the very nature of a servant.”

Jesus exemplified servanthood by taking a towel on the night in which he was betrayed and washing the feet of his disciples. What a model he left us. The one who should have been served “came to serve”.

Not that we are so high & mighty that others should serve us. But God has elevated us by bringing us up out of the miry clay of sin & desolation. As the psalmist (in 40:2-3) says:

“He lifted me out of the mud and mire. He set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.”

He who did all this for us has asked that we do that for one another and for the world around us.

That's what Matt said last year. I want to say it again this year, and here's how I want to say it:

It is my conviction that every believer & every church should take on some segment of the pain and hurt of humanity. [Let me say that again. . .]

STORY OF THOMAS

Years ago, I read a book by Mildred Bangs Wynkoop. There was a memorable quote that rocked me (and still does):

“When I cry and pray for a little heaven to go to heaven in, He shows me the hell in which other people live. It isn't time for heaven yet.”

God did that for me through an Indian named **Thomas**.

Back in 1980, I was pastor of a small Nazarene Church in Ann Arbor located on the doorstep of the University of Michigan. One cold winter evening in January, after a midweek meeting of some sort, I was in my office preparing to go home. A man in the church knocked on the door and told me there was a young man who looked deeply troubled sitting out on the front steps of the church. I went out and introduced myself and invited him back into my office. His story was very sketchy. He had started out from Detroit with a friend two days earlier. . .they separated somewhere between Detroit and Ann Arbor. . .he thumbed a ride on into Ann Arbor. . .then went to visit an ex-girlfriend (who lived around the corner from the church). . .and that was it. OK, I thought, let's see if we can get something for Thomas to eat and a place to stay for the night.

After taking him to McDonalds, we went to the police station to get a voucher for one of the local hotels who would accept "homeless" ("street") people. Thomas could produce no identification, but they took his name anyway. We were waiting for them to process things, when all of a sudden I heard a voice yell out, "*He's wanted for murder!*" Police quickly surrounded us; it seemed they were coming out of the walls. Thomas was very passive and offered no resistance.

They took him away, and there I stood—having started out to help a homeless man find some shelter, and instead he lands in jail.

A couple days later, Thomas was transferred to the Wayne County Jail in Detroit. I began to visit him weekly. At times he was almost catatonic, saying little. Eventually, however, the story came out. He had been living with a couple other guys in the inner city of Detroit. The night he left Detroit, one of the other guys committed a murder. Thomas witnessed it, got in the car and ran with him. That's what got him started in the direction of Ann Arbor. Along the way, they separated and Thomas landed on our doorstep.

I started conferring (in Thomas' behalf) with all the law enforcement people and the social workers. Naturally it was thought that he was an accomplice. After about three months, he was acquitted in a court hearing. By that time, we had become good friends, as I had walked him through the stages leading up to his court appearance. I had become a one-person system of support for Thomas. Afterwards, I tried to help him get established with housing and a job, but it wasn't long until he disappeared out of my life as suddenly as he had appeared.

About 8-9 years later, Thomas came back into my life for another period of about six months. At this point he was somewhat improved. . .had met a young woman. . .and they were going to get married. They had begun attending church, and were starting to walk in faith.

I cannot tell you how monumental that sequence of events was for me. It was one of those foundational experiences we've all had. . .a real turning point. God used it as a catalyst in my life, because:

- All a sudden, my eyes were wide open to human need. I saw it like I had never seen it before. . .and it broke my heart.
- I was driven to certain Scriptures I had only glossed over before. Now they came alive to me.
- I found myself being pointed in the direction of urban ministry, and eventually, spent 10 years working in the inner city of Detroit with an interdenominational ministry.

I want to share some of the Scriptures that spoke to my heart during that period (and still motivate me to this day).

SCRIPTURES

Micah 6:8 – *He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

People have tried all kinds of ways to please God. God has made it clear: He just wants his people to walk humbly with Him. . .to PURSUE JUSTICE and PRACTICE MERCY.

A. The Church God had in mind loves JUSTICE.

We who are a part of it believe and work for the *rights* and *fair treatment* of:

- The elderly
- The physically & mentally handicapped
- Those from other countries
- Those from all races (other than our own)
- The unborn
- The impoverished, including having access to adequate health care, housing, and employment. Proverbs 31:9 says: “*Speak up and judge fairly. Defend the rights of the poor and needy.*”
- We take stands for honesty & integrity in the workplace & in government.
- We want small businesses to thrive and not be eaten by greedy conglomerates.

B. The Church God had in mind also loves—and practices—MERCY person-to-person.

We who are a part of it *believe* and *attempt*:

- To be fair & equitable, kind & generous in our treatment of others.
- To show mercy—even to those who have wronged us.
- To serve & help & give with no expectation of receiving in return.

In a nutshell, that is our FOURTH CORE VALUE: **We witness to our faith with private acts of mercy.**

James 1:27 – *Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*

Widows had no means of economic support in James’ culture. They were often reduced to begging. . .even selling themselves as slaves. The Church God had in mind is one that cares for powerless people (no matter what makes them “powerless”). It’s a church that serves others.

Galatians 5:13-14 – *You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’*

Like a young person fresh out of high school and away from home for the first time, it seems like we have all the “freedom” in the world. But we must never use our freedom in the wrong way.

Freedom to sin may seem like “freedom” at first, but it’s not. It’s illusory. It’s really slavery—to Satan, to our compulsions, to our sinful nature.

Freedom to serve is true freedom. It may not seem like it at first. It may seem like we have to work up the motivation to serve. Once we do, those who are in Christ find they have been freed up to do right and glorify God through loving service to others. Ever notice how you feel after you have “committed” an act of mercy? That’s the feeling of true freedom.

Galatians 6:9-10 – *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*

You might “grow weary” when you receive no thanks, no acknowledgment. . .or see no tangible results. But keep on keeping on! Your job is to be faithful. . .and trust God for the results. In due time, there’ll be a harvest. [I saw no major change in Thomas. . .and only minor change 8-9 years later.]

As far as I can tell from Scripture, we are to “do good to all people” (including those beyond the walls of the church) AND “to those who belong to the family of believers” (i.e.: those within the church).

There is no distinction to be made!

APPLICATION

Now, Dexter is not exactly the inner-city. In fact, quite the opposite; it is a fairly affluent community. What I have come to see, however, is that the same human pain is here:

- People here are just as prone to addiction (e.g.: ironically, my first client at Brighton Hospital was from Dexter).
- Many of your children are not on the path you’d like – same as in the inner-city.
- Abuse of all kinds abounds – same as in the inner-city.
- Broken hearts, broken dreams, broken marriages are just as prevalent here as there.
- More families than you might think are struggling to make ends meet financially and are dangerously close to being homeless.
- Then there are the stresses & distresses that come with aging -- that’s true all over.

All of these issues are inside the church. . .all throughout the church. . .and just beyond it. The church is not a MUSEUM of exquisite finery. It is a HOSPITAL, made up of “patients” who desperately need God and need one another.

But, you say, I don’t have **the gift** of mercy (as described in Romans 12:8). Maybe you do; maybe you don’t. But you do have **the calling**:

- Not all are EVANGELISTS, but all are called to share our faith.
- Not all are PROPHETS, but we are all called to speak for God from time to time.
- Not all have the GIFT OF MERCY, but all of us are called to SHOW MERCY in our treatment of others and in our conduct toward those around us.

Some of you are in professions in which you are showing mercy to others every day (e.g.: health care field, social work, certain types of management, etc.). Still, all of us are called to witness to our faith with personal acts of mercy!

There are dozens of outlets for “showing mercy” here at DUMC:

- Every time Caring Connection visits the homebound, it’s an act of mercy.
- Every time you visit or sit with someone in the hospital, you’re showing mercy.
- Every time a Stephen Minister sits down with a Care Receiver, it’s an act of mercy.
- Every time Helping Hands responds to an emergency or non-emergency need, it’s an act of mercy. Recently, a small team helped a family moving back into the area who needed to get a truck unloaded in a very short span of time.
- Every time you provide a meal for someone who is recuperating, it’s an act of mercy.
- Some of you are taking care of kids that are not your own (biologically), because they have special physical or social needs. You’re showing mercy.
- When you work on a Habitat house, you’re showing mercy.
- When you spend a week at Red Bird in Kentucky, you’re showing mercy.
- Some teens have been in Memphis this very week doing a youth missions project. They’re showing mercy.
- Many are going to volunteer at IHN’s Alpha House in August. That’s an act of mercy.
- Many will do the CROP walk for the hungry in September. That’s an act of mercy.
- Many of you bring food items in to the Hunger Hamper—that’s an act of mercy.
- Many of you will be participating in one of the Health Connection’s upcoming projects. When you do, you’re showing mercy.

These are just the ones we are set up (organized) to do – through the *Caring Network Cell* and the *Missions Cell*. I like to think of this as “organized religion at its best”! It’s a huge testimony to a world that is watching and scrutinizing us.

Years ago, there was a raging debate about whether the church should be more concerned with *evangelism* (i.e.: winning the lost) or *social action* (i.e.: meeting human needs). It’s a silly debate! Of course we should be engaged in BOTH!

Compassion for the lost. Caring for the hurting. It’s a boat with **2 oars**. We’ve got to have both. The Church must fly with **2 wings**. Just as Jesus came with healing in his:

- He charged us with the *Great Commission* to win the lost.
- He charged us with the *Great Commandment* to love & care for one another and the needy.

That’s why I say: *every believer should take on some segment of the pain & hurt of humanity.*

Are you using your home, your car, a portion of your time, or income to show mercy?

In his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancy tells about **Henri Nouwen**, a priest who taught at Harvard and wrote many books on contemporary spirituality. He's certainly one of my favorites. Henri Nouwen gave up his position of intellectual influence at Harvard. . .moved to a community called Daybreak near Toronto. . .and spent many of his own last days taking care of a man named ADAM.

Adam is a 25 year old man whom many would say is a useless "vegetable" who should have been aborted. Nouwen describes him as someone who cannot speak. . .cannot dress or undress. . .does not cry or laugh. . .only occasionally makes eye contact. . .is distorted in posture. . .twisted in arm and leg movements. . .and experiences grand-mal seizures almost everyday. It takes 1.5 hours to awaken Adam. . .give him his medication. . .wash and bathe him. . .shave him. . .clean his teeth. . .dress him. . .walk him to the kitchen. . .give him his breakfast. . .put him in his wheelchair. . .and bring him to the place where he spends most of the day with therapeutic exercises. [cf. page 120]

When asked if this was really a wise use of his time, talents, and gifts, Nouwen was adamant: *"I am not giving up anything. It is I, not Adam, who gets the main benefit from our friendship."*

What benefit? *An inner peace. A sense of what's really important in life.* In his own words, Nouwen confesses: *"Early on, as I sat beside that helpless child-man, I realized how marked with rivalry and competition, how obsessive, was my drive for success in academia and Christian ministry. Adam taught me that what makes us human is not our mind but our heart, not our ability to think but our ability to love."*

The merciful are indeed blessed! They are shown a gracious mercy even as they show mercy!

P.S. Perhaps there are those here this morning who are heavily involved in caretaking and mercy showing. Do not allow weariness to overtake you, for in time you shall reap a harvest. Be encouraged! It may seem like you are engaged in menial, pointless tasks—like your life is on hold. But in fact you are doing the most important work imaginable because it is God's work, the work of showing mercy. So, don't give up!

CLOSING PRAYER

May there be less of SELF and more of YOU, O God.

Empty us, .so that we may be filled by You. . .and used of You. AMEN!

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BENEDICTION from the concluding verses of I Timothy (ch. 6:17-19)

You who are rich in this present world: don't be arrogant. . .don't put your hope in wealth, which is so uncertain. Put your hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Do good. Be rich in good deeds. And be generous and willing to share. Lay up treasures for yourselves for the coming age, so that you may take hold of *life that is truly life.*

May Christ be honored and glorified in your life this week.