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Mercy as Resistance

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Since today's Gospel begins with a lawyer, I am going to talk about a lawyer. Bryan Stevenson is a lawyer who has dedicated his entire career to his vision of justice as mercy. While many of us might think of mercy and justice as opposites, Stevenson has compelling evidence that true justice is in fact, mercy – showing compassion for someone within your power to punish or harm. He does not believe criminals should be excused for the crimes they commit, far from it. He does, however, point out the unjust biases of race and poverty that infect the justice system.

A Black man who graduated from Harvard Law School in 1985, Stevenson started working at the Southern Center for Human Rights in Montgomery Alabama, which happens to be located in the same county where Harper Lee, author of the Pulitzer Prize winning novel *To Kill A Mockingbird* grew up. When the federal government eliminated funding for death penalty defense, Stevenson founded the non-profit Equal Justice Initiative, and he is still its executive director. Through his 37 years of working with men, women, and children on death row, Stevenson is a powerful witness to the oppressive influence of racism that leads to an increase of mass incarceration and death penalty sentences for people of color disproportionate to that of white people. In response to this, EJI started two museums, both in Montgomery, that help illustrate the connection between slavery, lynching, and the injustice of the majority of men on death row are Black. (Incidentally, just down the road, in front of Baker Center there is a sign marking the place of a lynching of a Black man here in Athens that is part of a program the Equal Justice Initiative started that helps communities name and grieve lynchings in their past in order to heal and hopefully move forward to equality. The work of Equal Justice Initiative reaches into every state in the country.)

Here is what Bryan Stevenson says of his work in a recent interview he gave Kristina Tippet on NPR's program *On Being*: "We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair until we all suffer from the absence of mercy...It's necessary to recognize that we all need mercy, we all need justice and perhaps we all need some measure of unmerited grace. I've always felt like my work is for everybody. We are trying to save everyone from corruption, from the agony of lives where there is no mercy, where there is no grace, where there is no justice,

where we are indifferent to suffering. Those kinds of lives ultimately lead to violence and animosity and bigotry, and I don't want that for anybody."

Bryan Stevenson grew up in the church, which strongly influenced the direction of his work, and he is still loved and supported by his church. To me, what he said sounds a lot like Jesus' conversation with a completely different kind of lawyer that is often called The Parable of Good Samaritan that was in our Gospel reading today. We have to be especially cautious of assuming we already know what a parable is about. Parables are not morality tales. Often parables are how Jesus answered questions like the one the lawyer asked in today's Gospel. It was a question likely intended to pigeonhole Jesus into saying either what the lawyer wanted to hear or to get Jesus to say something that would get him in trouble with the establishment or populous.

We need to pay attention to the questions the lawyer asked. The first was What must I do to inherit eternal life? This is not about going to heaven when you die. This is a question about identity and salvation, about the life in this world in the age to come, when God's Kingdom is realized. It's about having a place in that age and Kingdom. Notice Jesus did not answer the lawyer's question. Instead, he asked him what the law says. And the lawyer replied: to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. Then Jesus said that is all there is to it, so go and do it.

But the lawyer wasn't finished. He asked the question that is the impetus for the Good Samaritan parable: Who is my neighbor? This is a question about who is in and who is not. It is a question that suggests there may be some folks the rules don't apply to. It's a question that suggests there isn't enough room for everybody.

Jesus responded to that question with a parable I am sure you have heard before. Jesus ended the parable by asking who was the neighbor? Notice Jesus switched the question the lawyer asked around: it is no longer about defining a neighbor by political party, religion, race, age, gender, economic status, sexual identity, or level of education. Now the question was who behaved like a neighbor? Who practiced neighborliness? And the answer was: the one who showed mercy. Making the practice of mercy essential to loving God and our neighbor.

Let's look back at the characters of the parable for a second. The two religious leaders who passed by were not doing anything wrong. In fact, they were following the law. It was against the law for a priest or religious leader to touch someone who was sick or dead, lest they become ritually and possibly

physically unclean. It meant they would not be able to perform other duties and responsibilities until they took the time to undergo purity rituals. Imagine a parish priest not being allowed to lead Sunday service or consecrate Holy Communion if they had visited someone who was sick or went to their deathbed a day or so before. There were reasons for the law that made sense at a time, but like any law, when you don't know when and how to bend it or change it, the law can cause harm. Not only to the person in the ditch, but to the two characters who passed him by believing following the law meant they did not have to care for a fellow human being. Maybe because they had never been shown mercy.

This is what is at the heart of the parable: justice without mercy can make some individuals assume care for each other does apply to them. Justice without mercy can lead to neglect of each other and prioritize things like jobs or titles over people. Justice without mercy can lead to dehumanizing our neighbors which can lead to vengeance and that is not loving God and our neighbor. Justice without mercy creates a society that accepts violence as a norm. Like Bryan Stevenson sometimes sees in his work. But not all the time. Sometimes mercy, like in the parable, is chosen and sometimes the justice system can be open to mercy, sometimes even admitting when it was wrong, or biased. For Stevenson, his clients and their families, and society at large, those are very good days.

Stevenson has his critics. There are plenty of people who say he is asking for changes that will never happen because society does not value mercy, seeing it as a weakness not a strength. But his vision of a more equitable justice system is not that different from Jesus' vision in the parable of mercy. The world Jesus lived in had plenty of injustice and sexism and racism. When Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, he was talking about something that plenty of people would say is not realistic or possible. It is a rare person who will stick their neck out for another. Likewise, it was quite possible the person in the ditch would have rejected the care from the Samaritan because they were different religiously, racially, even politically.

Yet in the parable, it was mercy that bathed and bandaged the wounds caused by violence. It was mercy that brought someone out of a ditch and gave them a safe place to recover. It was mercy that superseded law and was the manifestation of the love of God and love of neighbor.

We don't hear a lot about mercy these days. We do hear a lot about gun violence, rights being revoked, bigotry, trauma, and loss. We hear about the family of Emmitt Till persisting in seeking a fair trial for his murder after 67 years. These things seem to be accepted with the arrogance of the elite who walked on by the suffering on the side of the road. All this can inspire outrage and anger, but

we have to be careful that when anger cools it does not leave hopelessness in its wake. Often when we hear Jesus say, “Go and do likewise”, at the end of his conversation with the lawyer, we think we need to act like the Samaritan. And some of us, like Bryan Stevenson, can do such things, but what about those who aren’t equipped to go into the ditch? What about those who are already in the ditch? Or those who couldn’t resist the temptation to lash out at someone in anger? What about those who can provide places for recovery? If we can’t be like the Samaritan, might we start to feel hopeless? I don’t believe that was Jesus’ intention with the parable. Perhaps this parable is an invitation to practice mercy for all the characters in the parable and therefore all of us. To not worry about who is part of our neighborhood and who isn’t, but to be a neighbor by giving and receiving mercy.

In his book *Just Mercy A Story of Justice and Redemption*, Bryan Stevenson writes about how his clients and their families and other people he meets in the criminal justice system like members of the janitorial staff and observers in the courtroom have taught him about love and mercy. Through them, people who we might see as side characters in the parable, Stevenson found support that gives him hope to persevere in his work. This is a lesson he strives to share with everyone. In an interview he said, “Do not underestimate the power you have to affirm the humanity and dignity of the people who are around you. When you do, they will teach you something about what you need to learn about human dignity and what you can do to be a change agent. I am persuaded that hopelessness is the enemy of justice, if we allow ourselves to become hopeless, we become part of the problem. Injustice prevails where hopelessness persists.”

I know there is a lot in the world to be sad and angry about right now. I understand there is reason for despair and fear. But while such feelings might be justified, they do not always create equality or hope and can end up perpetuating the violence and injustice that caused them. What if we followed Jesus’ instructions to the lawyer in today’s Gospel by practicing mercy as a form of resistance to the injustices that cause pain and suffering? What if we were as open to receiving mercy as giving it? Perhaps such courageous resistance could bring some hope, healing, forgiveness, and yes, even justice – all the stuff of God’s merciful kingdom - into the world of neighbors who need it.