

Mercy: Spiritual and Religious Views
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When I was first assigned this theme, mercy, I was concerned that I might not have much to say that would be different from the theme of kindness which I coordinated and spoke to in December. Since then I have learned that mercy and kindness although related, are in fact different. I have come to realize that there are important things to be learned from the concept and practice of mercy beyond what was covered in the theme of kindness. Let me begin with a definition of “mercy” given by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar:

Mercy involves power. To show mercy to you, I must have something to offer you that I can choose to either give or withhold. Mercy is a way of using our power to show love and compassion. Most importantly, mercy is offered whether a person deserves it or not. In this sense mercy runs counter to justice. If justice is about making things fair and giving someone her due, mercy involves offering love and forgiveness even when a person may rightly deserve to be punished or shunned. An impoverished employee who steals from his boss to feed his hungry children could justifiably be fired or put in jail. However, being merciful might entail dropping the charges and even giving the worker a raise in his hourly wage.

Empathy for the plight of the transgressor or victim seems to be necessary in providing mercy.

Besides its use in the context of justice and transgressions, mercy applies to those situations where we receive a benefit we have not earned or escape harm when the odds are against us, as for example, when we have accident close calls or when we recover from a serious illness. Webster defines this use of the term as: “a blessing that is an act of divine favor or compassion or a fortunate circumstance.”

As sad as it is to watch the war in Ukraine, I take some heart in the mercy shown by those who are offering food, shelter, and transportation to those fleeing the conflict. I have been glad to see that even some of the Russian soldiers have shown mercy towards Ukrainian citizens who were brave enough to stand in front of tanks.

Many of you will remember the sentencing of Kim Potter, the policewoman that claimed shot the young black man Daunte Wright, in error. The judge in the case could have sentenced Potter to 7 years based on guidelines, but she decided upon less than 2 years. The judge took into consideration both Potter’s clear remorse for having made a mistake and a positive record as a police officer, with no criminal record at all. The decision was hurtful to the family of Daunte Wright. Here “justice was tempered with mercy,” as we say.

Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copland expressed that mercy was implied in our Second Principle, “Justice, Equity and Compassion in Human Relations.” Bryan Stevenson author of Just Mercy said, “The

true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.”

Even if we are not part of the legal system there are opportunities to act justly in our personal and work lives. Here is an example from my work experience at the VA. A woman veteran 35 years old or so, who I will call Betty, had created a stir on the inpatient psych ward. She made many demands for medication changes, privileges, and the like, she complained often about the rules, the food, other veterans, etc. and she seemed to constantly demand attention. When a veteran behaved this way there was a tendency to focus upon the personality disorder from which the behavior seems to stem. Along with this kind of labeling there is the desire to “get rid of” or discharge the veteran home if they have one, or else to a homeless shelter. But Betty also suffered from PTSD and Bipolar Disorder as well as whatever personality disorder traits she clearly showed. The combination of diagnoses and related problems had interfered in her personal life. She had no friends and her family had disowned her. She had never been married nor had she experienced a long-term relationship. In terms of assets, she had functioned reasonably well in the military. She was intelligent and had job skills but had been unable to maintain employment for any significant period post discharge from the service. Her current life was in shambles. I felt to simply discharge her from the medical center would have really accomplished nothing except to resolve the crisis that brought her to the acute psychiatric ward and to relieve the staff and other veterans of an annoyance. I had a hunch that there was a part of Betty that really wanted help. I approached her and offered that I would accept her into the rehabilitation program I was running at the time called “New Beginnings.” The program was designed to assist in managing one’s mental illness better. In exchange for acceptance, she had to agree to keep her complaining to a minimum, and to abide by the program rules strictly. Aware of the need she had and the potential benefit she might derive she readily agreed to my proposal. Next, I spoke to the rest of the treatment team. With the understanding that any infraction would result in immediate discharge, all agreed to the plan. Betty was transferred to New Beginnings and did very well thereafter. Not only were there no further infractions, but she also became truly a model patient, offering support to other veterans in the program. She formed friendships with other veterans who looked up to her for the way she was benefiting from the program and working on her recovery. Upon completing the program, she moved on to vocational rehabilitation which she also completed successfully. Had the staff simply followed the rules in applying justice and discharged her, a real opportunity would have been lost. Being merciful made sense in Betty’s case. We usually don’t give up on our kids when they make mistakes or choose poorly. Abraham Lincoln said, “I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice.”

Like love, mercy is believed to have both divine as well as human aspects. In the Abrahamic religions, God is seen as the source of love and mercy. Humans are seen as falling short of expectations, behaving in sinful ways and so on. However, the personal God of traditional religions, in his infinite mercy, offers forgiveness. Humans are expected to emulate God and behave mercifully towards others. For those who do not believe in a personal God, does the idea of a cosmic form of mercy have meaning? Here is how I think about this. I did nothing to deserve being born or little to deserve the fortunate life given to me. I receive a great deal

more from the world and from others than I give back. Some of my behavior is not constructive. Also there have been numerous occasions when I came close to having an accident in a car or otherwise, but I was spared. I received many opportunities in schooling and employment at the expense of others or at least seemed more the result of luck than worthiness. Some people like to refer to this kind of good fortune as the work of a guardian angel. I don't happen to believe in angels. I will still call these experiences examples of "divine or cosmic mercy."

Today I want to offer some perspective of traditional religions about divine mercy for background. I just want to make clear that mercy from non-human sources does occur whether we regard it as coming from a deity or not. And of course, there are human to human occurrences of mercy too. I will also talk about the practice of mercy as a part of a spiritual life, whether inspired by a religious faith or humanism.

In both the Hebrew and Christian Bible there are many stories to illustrate what is termed "God's mercy." The book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible or Torah tells the story of when the Israelites having left Egypt and, camped in the desert while they waited the return of Moses from Mount Saini. In their impatience and lack of faith in a God they could not see, they cast a "golden calf" from jewelry collected from the assembled group. As most of you know, it is considered a great sin in Judaism to worship an idol such as a golden calf. This violates one of the Ten Commandments. As the Exodus story goes, God was prepared to annihilate the whole assembly of the Israelites who participated in the idolatry of the golden calf and seek a relationship with another "chosen" nation. Moses asked for mercy and persuaded God to give the Israelites another chance. When Moses ascended Mount Sinai a second time with a new set of tablets this is what God said to Moses: [Your God is] "Merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping kindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." These words are a foundation of Jewish understanding of God as merciful, and these words are regularly recited in prayers. Mercy is referred to frequently in the Torah and I will give a few examples shortly.

There is a common misconception to view the God of the Torah as vengeful and the God of the Christian Bible, in contrast, as loving. Rabbi Reuven Hammer wrote about this misunderstanding. As an example, Rabbi Hammer said most people believe the rule "Love your neighbor as yourself," originates in the New Testament but in fact it is first quoted in Leviticus, in the Torah.

Rabbi Hammer pointed out another misunderstanding of Judaism, having to do with the "Pharisees" as they are depicted in the Christian Bible. Here is an example:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Mathew 23:23

The dictionary definition of pharisaism is: "an overzealous application of the letter of the law in a way that violates the spirit of the law, as well as fairness and mercy." The Pharisees were

precursors of the rabbis who came into being after the second temple was destroyed. The Pharisees were charged with interpreting the meaning of the biblical text. Some of them were strict in their interpretation. But others emphasized love and compassion. I quote Rabbi Hammer:

[Those who misrepresent the Pharisees] are ignoring the basic teachings of the Torah and of the rabbis who, time and time again, emphasize the importance of love and mercy. The Torah itself teaches not only love of neighbor, but love of the stranger. It depicts God as passionately advocating the rights of the poor, the widow and the orphan. It speaks of God as “merciful and compassionate,” as well as forgiving of sin. The early prophet Micah taught: “What does the Lord require of you – only to do justice, love mercy and walk modestly with your God” (6:8). [Rabbi] Hillel, who lived before Christianity, taught that the essence of Judaism was “do not do to others what you would not want to have done to you,” which was his interpretation of “Love your neighbor.” He also taught that one should “love all humankind.” [Rabbi] Akiva, a few generations later, followed in his way, teaching that “love your neighbor” was the fundamental principle on which the entire Torah was based, that “humans are beloved” and are all created in the Divine image. The Talmud teaches: “We should follow the attributes of God. As God clothed the naked, so should you clothe the naked. As God visited the sick, you should visit the sick. As God comforted the mourners, you should comfort the mourners.”

While there are references to God’s anger and vengeance there is much in the Torah that speaks to the requirement of caring for others who are disadvantaged including, the stranger, the widow, and the poor. The Torah also teaches that God forgives all who seek atonement with sincerity and remorse.

From the Book of Micah in the Torah:

Who is like You [God] pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy. He will again have compassion on us and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. 7:18-19

And from the book of Zachariah in the Torah:

So said the Lord of Hosts, saying: Execute true judgment and perform loving-kindness and mercy, each one [of you] to his brother. Do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the stranger, or the poor man. Neither shall any of you think evil against his brother in your heart. 7: 9-10

Jesus was among the Jewish teachers of his time who emphasized the “merciful” side of Jewish teaching rather than the strict side. Jesus also anticipated that transition of Judaism from a religion focused on animal and crop sacrifice, to one based on prayer as a means of worship.

The merciful treatment of others was always a part of Judaism. The destruction of the second temple approximately 40 years after Jesus' death required Judaism to make this transition to prayer as there was no longer a temple where sacrifices could be offered.

For Christians Jesus is the embodiment of God's mercy. In Christian teaching, all of us are born with original sin and inevitably commit additional sins during a lifetime. Jesus' life is an example of mercy and kindness. He forgives sin, feeds the hungry and lifts up the needs of the oppressed. His crucifixion is understood as the sacrifice required to free people of sin. Baptism and faith in God are among the practices that are thought to secure God's mercy. I mentioned earlier sacrifice in Judaism was the form of worship until the temple was destroyed. When the people brought their offerings to the temple in Jerusalem for sacrifice it served two purposes. One was an expression of gratitude, giving something back to God in exchange for the bounty of livestock and crops. The second purpose was the expectation that God would accept the "sacrifice" of a calf or lamb instead of God taking a life of a person because of their sin. In Christianity, Jesus became the permanent replacement for this practice. Jesus became the sacrifice. Salvation through Christ is the essence of what Christians refer to as God's mercy, God's ultimate sacrifice.

Here are some quotations from the Christian Bible about mercy:

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved). Ephesians 2:4-5

...be merciful just as your father also is merciful. John 6:36

For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. James 2:13

Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing. 1 Peter 3: 8-9.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Mathew 5:7

Islamic scholar Osman Bakar had a dialogue with the Dalai Lama in which they discussed mercy as a form of spiritual practice. The Arabic word for mercy from the Quran is "*rah-mah*" and it was defined as compassion, love, mercy, and kindness. The Dalai Lama said it was comparable to what "*karuna*" or compassion means to Buddhists and what "*agape*" or love signifies for Christians. Mercy, Bakar said, is the most divine attribute of God, who is described as "most gracious" and "most compassionate." "Mercy to the world" is one of the famous quotations of the Prophet Muhammad, who was especially compassionate to orphans, the poor, the weak and oppressed. Prof. Bakar also remarked that the divine law of Islam (Sharia) was given as

guidance and mercy by God the lawgiver out of his compassion, mercy, and kindness. Bakar concluded that all human beings have a seed of compassion and mercy, but these qualities need to be developed as part of a faithful Islamic life. Here again the Dalai Lama agreed.

Those who are familiar with Buddhism know that compassion towards others is a core principle. Guanyin is the goddess of compassion of Buddhism. There are statues of her and her son that are quite reminiscent of statues depicting the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus. When such Buddhist and Christian statues are viewed side by side one feels the embodiment of a divine compassion that transcends cultural and religious differences. The image of mother and child as depicted in Buddhist and Christian art are symbolic of divine mercy. We are all born of a mother and most of us were cared for and sustained by our mothers. The message these statues send is that the way a mother will overlook a child's ill temper, misbehavior, and other difficulties is a model for how we are to treat others. A mother will nurture her child because of her strong attachment and the feeling that the child is a part of her. In our dealings with others in general, and especially when there is a power differential, as there is between a mother and a child, the major religions invite us to use mercy inspired by a mother's love.

Many of you are familiar with the story in the Book of Kings of King Solomon's judgment. Two mothers came before the king each insisting a baby was theirs. The baby of one of the mothers died in the night and so she switched her dead baby for the other mother's living baby. The mother of the living baby knew which baby was hers, but the other mother refused to concede. The mothers came before King Solomon to resolve the dispute. Solomon decreed the living baby should be cut in half, giving one half to each mother. Tearfully, the rightful mother then spoke up and said the other mother could have the baby. It became clear who the rightful mother was by her obvious compassion and mercy.

It is helpful to remember that we all make mistakes, and we all find ourselves in difficulty and in need of help and mercy. When we see others in such difficulties our sense of empathy and mercy call us to act. Both the Hebrew and Arabic words for mercy literally refer to the womb. A quote from the Book of Isaiah illustrates this: "Shall a woman forget her sucking child, from having mercy on the child of her womb? These too shall forget, but I will not forget you." Isaiah 49:15 The mother-child bond seems to be the universal template for mercy. It not only symbolizes divine mercy, but it also inspires us to act mercifully with others because we were nurtured by a mother's love. Especially when we contemplate how much each of us has received during our lifetimes in mercy both from the world and from other people, perhaps we are moved by this awareness to show mercy to others.

