

Sometime after January 20th I decided to try to read poetry with my morning coffee instead of doom scrolling on my phone. I'm not always successful, but I did buy a copy of Devotions; The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver to begin with. This last week I opened my book to a poem called "*On Thy Wondrous Works I Will Meditate*", which is based on Psalm 145. I'd like to share a segment from that poem:

*Every morning I want to kneel down on the golden
cloth of the sand and say
Some kind of musical thanks for
the world that is happening again - another day -
From the shawl of wind coming out of the
west to the firm green
Flesh of the melon lately sliced open and
Eaten, its chill and ample body
Flavored with mercy. I want
to be worthy of what, Glory? Yes, unimaginable glory.
O Lord of melon, of mercy, though I am
not ready, nor worthy, I am climbing toward you.*

As children, some of us were taught that the story of Zacchaeus was about a person who was so enamored with Jesus that he climbed a tree so he could catch a glimpse as Jesus walked by. The song I remember from my childhood leaves out many quite important details that raise questions, a few of which we talked about during our Wednesday night Bible study this week. Questions like: Do we really know why Zaccheaus climbed that tree? And are the promises he makes a sign of repentance or simple regret? And what is the best description of how Jesus responds? Did he offer grace? Forgiveness? Compassion? Mercy? Or a combination of all of the above?

I'd like to suggest that Jesus does offer Zaccheaus grace, in that he had not done anything to warrant Jesus' attention and yet he got attention, and that Jesus offers compassion in that he saw Zaccheaus as an outsider, ostracized by the community and invites him to come down from the tree and join the crowd. But most of all I think that Jesus offers Zaccheaus a mercy that makes hope visible.

In the heart of the Diocese of Saint Petersburg Florida, a bold challenge has been set—one that calls for one million acts of mercy in a single year.

It all began with a vision: What if, during a Jubilee Year of Hope, the entire diocese came together in a wave of merciful compassion? What if every parishioner, student, and faith community committed to feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, visiting the sick, and comforting the sorrowful? Could one diocese truly make that kind of impact?

This has been more than just a challenge—it has been a transformation. Inspired by the words of Pope Francis... people began to see that mercy is more than charity—it is hope made visible. Every meal given, every kind word spoken, every moment spent in prayer was a thread in the fabric of a renewed and compassionate community. The expectation has been that by the end of a year, the impact wouldn't just be measured in numbers, but in lives touched. A million acts of mercy—a million ways to say, "You are loved."

I'm leaning toward mercy as a descriptor of what Jesus does in this story because of the way we typically *define* mercy. Thomas Aquinas defined it as "a certain kind of sorrow at another's distress, which prompts one to alleviate that distress." Augustine similarly described mercy as "heartfelt compassion for another's distress, which drives one to action." Modern use of the word mercy implies compassionate treatment, especially when it's within one's power to punish or harm someone for their behavior. To be merciful is to spare someone from punishment.

The Hebrew word *rachamim*, often translated as mercy, carries profound emotional and physical connotations, as it is derived from the root *rechem*, meaning womb. This linguistic connection suggests that mercy is not merely an intellectual or judicial principle but something deeply organic—an outpouring of fierce, nurturing love, akin to the devotion of a mother safeguarding her child. It evokes an instinctive, almost primal response, where love and protection are inseparably intertwined.

In ancient Israel, *rachamim* extended beyond the notion of leniency or withholding deserved punishment. Its essence is far richer, deeply rooted in the framework of covenantal faithfulness and unwavering sustenance. It signifies a love that is not contingent on merit but on relational depth.

I think Jesus looked up into that tree and knew right away that this was a man in distress. This was a man literally separated from his community. This was a man whose livelihood involved doing harm to others, and no heart is not warped by that kind of work. This was a man who was lost. And so Jesus offers him mercy.

And so I return to Oliver's poem. Jesus chooses to respond to Zaccheaus from a place of unimaginable glory, and by glory I mean the magnificence or great beauty, the splendor or brilliance of a deep and all-encompassing love. His response to Zaccheaus is "flavored with mercy", and Zaccheaus seems to know that he is not ready nor worthy, but he climbs toward the Holy One with determination nonetheless.

"God has a really bad habit of using people we don't approve of," teacher and author Rachel Held Evans once said. Zaccheaus wasn't liked by many people, and following his encounter with Jesus there might have been some jealous backlash. And I'm sure he didn't suddenly become a nice guy. He did promise to give back what he had stolen from his neighbors, but I imagine he probably kept doing his job regardless. As was pointed out in our Bible study group, change takes time for everyone. Salvation, if you will, is a process of being told you are loved and worthy and then beginning to believe it yourself.

Offering mercy to someone you despise, just as those in the crowd despise Zaccheaus, is one of the greatest challenges of moral and spiritual growth. Mercy, at its deepest level, isn't about the worthiness of the recipient—it's about the character of the giver. Working on character development is a lifelong practice of cultivating and offering mercy even when resentment or hatred lingers. It often helps to think about **Mercy as a Choice, Not a Feeling**. Mercy doesn't require us to like a person. It's an act of will, not emotion. We may despise someone's actions, but choosing to act mercifully—whether through restraint, kindness, or forgiveness—reflects our values, not theirs.

Sometimes it requires a **Shift In Our Perspective**. People are often shaped by their wounds, experiences, and struggles and so we have to try to see them as more than just their worst actions. This doesn't mean excusing their behavior, but understanding that brokenness often begets brokenness, can soften our hearts.

If we value mercy as a principle, offering it—even when difficult—aligns with our higher self. Each one of us has to ask: Who do I want to be? rather than What does this person deserve? And let's not forget that there will be a time when each of us will need Mercy as well.

Our lives can be flavored with mercy. We can offer a sweetness and nurturing that reflects the heart and womb of God; an unimaginable glory. I find listening to a

poem more than once helps me remember it so, in closing, here is Oliver's poem once again:

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cloth of the sand and say
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