

March 25

*'Blessed are those
who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.'*

At the end of his time in the wilderness, Jesus was famished. No food for forty days and nights. How many days before his head started to spin? How many nights before that line between dreams and reality started to blur? Perhaps the gospel story of the devil tempting Jesus is a description of what happens in the mind after more than a month of suffering. A vision? A daydream? This would make it no less real, no less dangerous.

Even when we're well nourished – church every Sunday, prayers every day, blessed with friends to help bear our burdens – it's not all that easy to resist temptations. The voice is seductive: "You deserve it! Treat yourself! Why not?" And sure, that's all well and good when we're talking about the occasional indulgence. Jesus and his disciples were not ascetics – on the contrary, they got into trouble for drinking and having fun when other people were fasting! We are supposed to be a joyful people who know how to throw a party. The important thing is the question of what we make the ultimate object of our hunger and thirst. Is it our bellies or our God? If, at the end of a hard day, we find ourselves in the habit of saying, "I really need a drink," this may be a sign that it's time to consider the difference.

Jesus had a secret. He never forgot to hunger and thirst for God. Even when his belly was aching, and his mouth was dry. He knew that the Word of God was the true source of his life. And this is what filled him, blessed him, made his life radiant.

-Jonathan Hauze

March 30

*'Blessed are the merciful,
for they will receive mercy.'*

Near the beginning of *Paradise Lost*, the poet John Milton imagines Satan trying to understand how his plans have come to ruin. Cast out of heaven, the fallen angel now lies in the darkness of Chaos, sitting on a heap of ruins, where he might see how utterly he has failed:

*How all his malice serv'd but to bring forth
Infinite goodness, grace and mercy shewn
On Man by him seduc't, but on himself
Treble confusion, wrath and vengeance pour'd.*

Whatever you think about the personified figure of Satan – for some Christians he is very real, while for many others he is a meaningful metaphor for the reality of evil in the world – Milton tells us all something important about God's power and purposes. As much as the powers that be, whether earthly or spiritual, endeavor to oppose the healing, life-giving, loving way of God, they will not succeed.

They cannot, because God will be glorified. All the malice in the world will not break the bulwark of God's love. Here in Milton's poem, Satan is frustrated and maddened by the thought that his worst only succeeded in bringing forth "Infinite goodness, grace and mercy" shown in the lives of human beings who have been blessed by God in Christ. Upon Satan is poured a triple dose of confusion, wrath, and vengeance – upon humankind is poured the Holy Spirit.

How can we not be merciful? God has blessed us with infinite mercy. How can we keep from singing his love song?

-Jonathan Hauze

March 31

*'Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.'*

We say, “it’s the truth, pure and simple.”

Oscar Wilde says, “The truth is rarely pure and never simple.”

Don’t be impressed by the Wilde quote—I picked it up from an episode of Sherlock. I only mention it because I feel like the same could be said of people: rarely pure and never simple. So much so that I’ve often wondered who this beatitude is for. The saints? Sir Galahad? Cinderella?

But Jesus is speaking to all of his disciples. Including the one who would betray him. And the one he called his “Rock”—who would deny him three times before the cock crowed. Not a whole lot of purity in that bunch. Rarely pure and never simple, just like us.

There is, however, something simple about the gospel message. So simple that we assume we must have gotten something wrong, and we make up all kinds of rules to satisfy our own sense of what kind of message would be worthy of God. Could it be any simpler than love? That’s the commandment that Jesus gives his disciples: “Love one another.”

Want to see God? Love someone. It’s the first step to loving everyone. It’s the first rung of the ladder that rises to heaven, on which angels are ascending and descending, this very moment, even in the midst of our messy, complicated lives.

-Jonathan Hauze

Blessed

Daily Devotions for Lent
2019



Lent 4
March 25-31

*St. Paul’s United Church of Christ
Exton, Pennsylvania
www.saintpaulsucc.net*

March 29

*'Blessed are the merciful,
for they will receive mercy.'*

There are a few poems and poets that I return to again and again, as if drawing water from a well. Every day we are surrounded and bombarded by so much ugly language that we cannot help but thirst for words that are true and beautiful. I'm not talking about hearing the f-bomb or seeing "it's" when it should be "its." (Though, for the record, we can do better on both of those fronts.) I'm thinking of the lies, the sales pitches, the self-righteous judgments, the declarations of hatred, the meaningless chatter that saturate our lives today.

Wendell Berry is one of those poets to whom I turn in hours of weariness and confusion. He speaks truly:

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.

I carry this last line around with me as a kind of Cliff's Notes to the gospel. "Love someone who does not deserve it." People say, "I hope he gets what's coming to him." People get upset when good things happen to 'bad' people. But God's grace can't be earned. Which is a good thing, because in our perfect imperfection we'll never deserve it. But God is not merciful because we deserve it. God is merciful because mercy is divine. Think being human is the opposite of being divine? Think again. When we choose mercy, the beauty of heaven shines through us. When we choose love, the Word of God is revealed in us. Such is the wonder of the kingdom of heaven – it is closer than we know.

-Jonathan Hauze

March 26

*'Blessed are the merciful,
for they will receive mercy.'*

Why is it that we only use the phrase "at your mercy" in a negative, fearful context? I'm trying to think of a positive example, but nothing comes to mind. As I sit down to write this, in fact, I shudder at the thought of being at someone's mercy. It means that my fate rests in someone's hands. It implies that I am no longer fully free. Remember, in the movie "Gladiator," how the emperor would give a thumbs-up or thumbs-down to indicate whether the loser should be slain? When Maximus refused to obey the emperor's command to kill, somebody shouted, "Maximus the Merciful!" and the crowd went wild. Maximus may have been a slave, but in that moment at least he had the freedom to choose. Not so for the guy who was kneeling in the dirt.

I suppose this is the moment to be thankful that we are not gladiators in ancient Rome. Most of us will never know such a terrifying feeling. But others do. Think of the prisoner who is on death row, or the person in Syria whose life is at the mercy of the lords of war. In this context, 'mercy' is strangely impersonal and practically indifferent to the fate of any one person. No wonder it has a negative connotation. We cannot trust any person to know what is ultimately good.

But God knows. God knows us – not only the things that would condemn us, but the thing that redeems us. God knows, because God has made us his own. Christ has set us free and given us a new life. We are not 'at' God's mercy but in it. Thanks be to God!

-Jonathan Hauze

March 27

*'Blessed are the merciful,
for they will receive mercy.'*

*

*The quality of mercy is not
strained.
It droppeth as the rain
from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is
twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives
and him that takes.*

-William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

**

Rain From Heaven

by Lauren Alexandro

Happy are those who easily forgive.
Compassion flows from their hearts and lips.
A fresh spring bubbles up clear and cool.
The tiniest droplets of water douse harmful fires.

Happy are those who embrace kindness.
Love pours out from their hearts and hands.
A gentle rain falls and softens hard soil.
The small seeds sprout and bring new life.

March 28

*'Blessed are the merciful,
for they will receive mercy.'*

Notice that Jesus emphasizes the act of receiving. This may be important. He might have said, "Blessed are they merciful, for God will have mercy on them." But he didn't. Instead we are invited to consider our part in receiving God's gift. I happen to believe that God is merciful toward all people, even to the cruel and unforgiving. We may like to imagine that our enemies will suffer because God must conform to our notion of justice, but God tends to insist upon his freedom. Remember what God says to Moses: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."

But there remains the question of what we are willing to receive. God gives and forgives abundantly, but do we open ourselves to these outpourings of love? A friend might offer us a precious gift, but if we do not stretch out our arms and open our hands to receive it, it will fall to the ground, robbing ourselves and our friend of joy. This is essentially what happens each time that we refuse to practice forgiveness and mercy – our arms might as well be folded across our chest – our hands might as well be clenched.

The beautiful paradox of God's gifts is that we must give them away in order to receive them. We do not own them. And they are not given for our sake. They are given to glorify God, and when human hearts are joined by divine acts of mercy, the whole world is blessed. We all say that we want to be a part of something bigger; it doesn't get any bigger than this.

-Jonathan Hauze