

**Sermon: Covering One Another**  
**Scripture: Exodus 34:1-7a; Luke 18:9-14**  
**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**  
**Date: October 27, 2019**

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I often like to remember the magnitude of years that are represented when we do such a simple thing as read our scripture in worship together. We are separated by about 2000 years from our New Testament scripture, the parable that Jesus tells, and when Jesus was telling that parable he and his listeners were separated by about 2000 years from the Exodus scripture that Laurie first read, but it too would have been ringing in their ears.

The phrase that we are referencing in our stewardship materials this year is from the Exodus passage “abounding in love and faithfulness” which is how God describes Godself to Moses on Mount Sinai and in so far as we are a church representing and manifesting God, we too are called to abound in love and faithfulness. It’s one of the more famous phrases in the Old Testament and is quoted throughout in the prophets and psalms and the wisdom writings. It’s known as the “mercy formula” and is God’s response to Israel’s betrayal in worshipping the golden calf. “The Lord is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness...maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”

I had Laurie stop right there at verse 7a, that’s half of verse 7. That’s the nature of God, abounding in love and faithfulness. BUT what’s intense about this passage of Exodus 34:6-7, a couple of verses that has volumes and volumes of interpretation connected to them, is how the rest of the statement goes. After the mercy formula the rest of verse 7

reads: “Yet, God does not leave the guilty unpunished but punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation!” We thought for the purposes of encouraging you to financially support the church, that we’d just stop with abounding in love and faithfulness and leave out the threat! To be fair though there are many other places in the Old Testament itself that do the same thing, lop off that harsh ending and emphasize God’s mercy and love.

But when we consider the nature of God - which is admittedly a fraught exercise in itself but one that we’ve been given to since the beginning of human consciousness - but when we ponder the nature of God, if we are going to say that Creator God is merciful, forgiving, abounding in love, it also suggests that the other side of the coin from those is at least possible too, that God could be merciless, strictly just, and punishing. The Hebrew conception of God as revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai does not come down on one side or the other but invites us to hold the paradox of this divine formulation – “the Lord is compassionate and gracious, maintaining love and forgiving wickedness” and “The Lord does not leave the guilty unpunished, but punishes the children and their children.” In the Hebrew mind it is not an either-or but a both-and proposition. God is both merciful and just. Love involves forgiveness and consequences.

Personally I’m much more comfortable with the first half of the statement and I’ve witnessed God’s merciful and loving presence. But it’s really not about my comfort, is it and so while I’m really uncomfortable with the notion of God punishing for generations, I have to admit that I also have first hand knowledge of the truth of that. I

wouldn't put it that way, that it's God punishing per se, but if you consider, for instance, a child abuser who I think we'd all agree is breaking God's good order, then you can see how often that abuse, that breaking of covenant, you might say, reverberates from generation to generation, punishing the children of the abuser and the children of their children. I wouldn't say by any means that it's God's desire to punish but that it's the consequential nature of how God has designed the world seems evident to me.

So according to our scriptures God is merciful and forgiving and all-loving and God is a God of justice and there are laws and orders to creation that have consequences when broken. God is a loving Father, capable of forgiveness for our waywardness and an exacting Judge who has built into this existence consequences for our waywardness; a nurturing forgiving mother and a divine presence that holds out fiercely for justice and righteousness.

It helps us then to have this formulation of God's nature in our ears as we read Luke's account of Jesus, his teachings and stories and life in our Christian scriptures as one can see quite evidently that same tension in the nature of God surface. It is unfair to our Jewish neighbors to frame the Old Testament or Hebrew scriptures as the God of justice and anger and Jesus and our New Testament as correcting God's image to be all-loving, merciful and forgiving. Instead we need to think of the paradox of the justice of God and the mercy of God being a part of the consciousness of the Jews of the Old Testament as well as the Jews of the New Testament. Read the Gospels with this paradox in mind and you'll see it ever-present even in Jesus himself, exacting and judgmental

and angry at times – think, if anyone cause a little one to stumble, better for them to be drowned with a millstone around their neck – that’s Jesus as exacting judge, but of course there’s also Jesus loving and merciful and patient at other times, being the good Jew that he was, being God’s nature lived in human form, it was both and.

And so we hold the paradox of God’s nature in our minds as we read today’s parable as well and hear it creating a terrible ambiguous unease.

The Pharisee coming to the temple is the representation in the Jewish world of the faithful, loving and merciful God. And the tax collector, a sinner, a collaborator with Rome, one who – often shamelessly - benefited off the backs of others is the representation of one judged under the exacting justice of God. God’s justice and God’s mercy takes a disorienting turn as Jesus seems to suggest that the one under judgment of God’s justice – the tax collector – somehow becomes a recipient of God’s mercy and the one who is seeking to be a living embodiment of God’s faithfulness and love – the Pharisee – comes to be held to task under God’s exacting judgment. It should be as disorienting to us as it was to Jesus’ listeners in his day. Wait a minute, now who is under God’s mercy and who is under God’s judgment? Exactly. That there is God’s mercy and there is God’s judgment, there is no question, but who belongs where and how to get from the indictment of one to the grace of the other is the itch that Jesus’ parable seeks to create. And it should itch us.

There’s a little known translation snag though in the passage that further breaks it open in an interesting way for our purposes this

morning. It's in the phrase "rather than" – "I tell you this man (tax collector) went down to his home justified RATHER THAN the other (the Pharisee), for all who are humbled will be exalted and the exalted will be humbled." But it would be an equally legitimate translation of the phrase to make it "along with" instead of "rather than", though very few translators make that choice. But if you did make that choice the passage would read: "I tell you this man went down to his home justified ALONG WITH the other, etc..." It would be equally as troubling or disorienting that the tax collector would be justified, made righteous by God, *along with* the Pharisee as it would if the tax collector was justified *rather than* the Pharisee and in certain ways it makes more sense.

For you see built into the Jewish religious practice especially at the time of the temple period was this deep communal sense that certain members of the group could cover for other members, that they were in this together. Our modern sense of individual spiritual practice was not operative back then and was not part of their religious consciousness. So the Pharisees, for instance, who were devout and faithful Jews were devout and faithful on behalf of the people. Same with the priests and the practice of scapegoating where the sins of the people were ritually heaped on a goat and then the goat chased out of town or sacrificed in order to take away the sins of the people. This is essentially what Jesus' sacrifice was about and how it was understood. Some who lived strictly under God's justice and God's law held out for God's mercy to cover those who were less able to do so, who were otherwise condemned under God's judgment.

So this reminds us that in the economy of God's justice and God's mercy, in the nature of God and God's world, we are responsible for one another and can cover one another. So when the utter fierceness of living in a world where such thing as addiction exists, and young and old people alike die from them, and can rip the heart out of those around them, how can those of us who bear witness in community to such tragedy and grief, be spiritually disciplined in such a way, that we can cover those staggering under the weight of that reality? Can we offer our own living, our hard disciplines, our faithful prayers, even our own pain for the sake of others so that we cover for them.... and in community allow or trust that others are doing that for us. We all, each of us, live inside God's mercy in certain ways and certain times and we all live under the weight of God's just judgment in our waywardness at other times, but when we are devoted to community we can and do receive the cover for one another so that ultimately God's mercy is what endures and overshadows the day. We are both the tax collector and Pharisee, sinner and saved, living under the glory of God's mercy and the fierceness of God's justice together and we can draw one another towards the mercy seat as we might share our umbrella in the pouring rain or cover the cost of our friends debt.

And this I think can put us in the right mind-set for considering how we each contribute financially to the well-being and flourishing of Christ's church here on Church St in Winchester. It's fair enough to consider what you receive from being connected to this church and base your giving for the coming year off of the value you gain here in this community. But can we also think about it in terms of how we are

covering one another in what we are giving. In order for our church to abound in love and faithfulness, for God's mercy to be present and for us to be held up under the weight of God's justice, we need to cover for one another, bear some of the weight for each other, cover the cost so to speak of the economy of grace offered in and through this community. It is just money but we all know it is more than money. It's the foundational resource for the living out and living forth of our ministries and relationships in God's household. I personally thank you for your generosity and among many other things what it means for me to make a living being your Lead Pastor. You cover me. And I hope that in my ministry with you you've experienced something of my role in covering you.

As we know, ultimately God covers us through Jesus Christ, but this is not without our involvement and I pray that we as a church can continue to thrive abundantly in God's loving faithfulness and bear witness to such in our lives within and beyond these walls. Amen.