

First Friends Church, a Quaker Meeting
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March 28, 2021
Abundant Love- Palm Sunday
Psalm 118

Psalm 118

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever." Let the house of Aaron say, "His steadfast love endures forever." Let those who fear the LORD say, "His steadfast love endures forever." Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me in a broad place. With the LORD on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me? The LORD is on my side to help me; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to put confidence in mortals. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to put confidence in princes. All nations surrounded me; in the name of the LORD I cut them off! They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side; in the name of the LORD I cut them off! They surrounded me like bees; they blazed like a fire of thorns; in the name of the LORD I cut them off! I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the LORD helped me. The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: "The right hand of the LORD does valiantly; the right hand of the LORD is exalted; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly." I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD. The LORD has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death. Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it. I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD. The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Message

A recent Quaker Life edition was about the topic of mercy. An author wrote, "Mercy is just compassion shown to one who comes from the outside, one who hasn't deserved love."¹ She used the story of Jonah to describe it. God's mercy provides the people of Ninevah an opportunity to repent. Jonah doesn't want this to happen. He wants the outsiders annihilated. As a human being, Jonah gets angry

¹ Julie Rudd, Quaker Life

about God's grace and mercy because, "God doesn't know that is not how things are done." At the end, Jonah even rejects God's mercy when it is shown to him.

The premise is: In grace God extends mercy and forgives us even when it is undeserved and humans should appreciate that. It made me realize, I never actually understood the concept of God's mercy.

For me, mercy and grace are human concepts. They both come from the idea of humans as sinful and undeserving of relationship with God and the love God offers. But for me God is just bigger than that. God is God. There is nothing we can do to deserve God's love and nothing we can do to lose God's love. God's love is love. Love is love, true love is love. Love is a sacred paradox. It can never be, and always is, deserved. To say God's love is unconditional and God's forgiveness and mercy comes through grace (an undeserved gift) just seems redundant.

To be merciful is to forgive and to reserve punishment where punishment is deserved. Grace is kindness beyond deserving going the extra mile, compassion without being repaid. But how can God go the extra mile? How could we repay God's compassion? By its nature compassion is not something that can be repaid to God or anyone! In my mind, mercy is superfluous for God. God has already forgiven us for whatever, because God never held it against us. God does not punish, is not retributive, nor does God seek vengeance so God's justice does not need to be tempered with mercy. God does not need to show undeserved mercy or

unmitigated grace because God loves us always, totally from our beginning in all our ups and downs through our end to our new beginnings in every moment of ends and beginnings, God does not need mercy or grace. God is love.

Coming at it from the other side; I cannot imagine God exercising the opposite of mercy; withholding compassion, punishing when asked for forgiveness or even when not requested, or punish someone horribly- commensurate with a horrible crime they have committed.

The God I know cannot do these things because it is not in God's nature. God always wants for our highest and best- whether we want or do it or not, whether we are good or bad. God wants relationship with us. God is disappointed, dismayed, mourns when we do or choose less than our highest good. But God keeps coming back. I have said and done things, that when I look back, I cannot think what I was thinking. I survived them and was able to overcome, apologize and forgive myself only because God was already there luring me beyond those things into forgiveness and new life.

The only attributes the earliest creeds specify about God are: Almighty, Creator, and Father. But I see God as Love. 1John 4:8 and 16 both read "God is love." Paul's letter to the church in Rome is regarded by some scholars to be his last letter, summarizing what he has learned through his ministry. He has been used by some as a strict yardstick measurement for who is in and who is outside. Yet

even he wrote, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our lord.” There are no conditions, nothing about deserving. We can never be separated from God’s love.

God’s abundant love has no boundaries, barriers or limits- by definition it cannot. It is God’s love. There is an old hymn that might be familiar, “There is a Wideness in God’s Mercy.” The lyrics include: “...We make God’s love too narrow by false limits of our own... for the love of God is wider than the measures of the mind...”² There is a wideness in God’s mercy because neither God nor love can be narrow.

Humans seek mercy from rules, governments, and authorities but don’t need to seek God’s mercy because there is no punishment. We do not need to seek to escape unmerited or deserved punishment because there is no punishment. Punishment, vengeance and revenge are human concepts we foist upon God. We make mistakes, we fall down and God is there to up help us get back up with kindness and compassion. God does not require us to ask for or deserve compassion and kindness. True compassion and kindness are never deserved. They cannot be because that is not what they are.

² Frederick William Faber

God sends new opportunities for relationship with God through in all the prophets including Jesus, Gandhi, MLK, Jr and the people in our midst, as well as the birds, trees and flowers in the moments of joy and comfort, despair and sorrow. Only human beings believe punishment like disownment, incarceration, physical discipline or execution can correct behavior, restore relationships or bring justice. Only human beings believe we should ever withhold compassion and kindness.

Today's psalm led me to ask, "What abundant love do we see on our Palm Sunday- how do we reinterpret this psalm for our times?" The psalmist tells us that even in the most challenging time, when there was nothing else, God's love endures. The query that arose was, "What am I doing, thinking, and saying that draws me and others closer to God's abundant love?"

I have told my story about Namibia. There were problems in the tiny settlement. Drugs, alcohol abuse, family dysfunction, racism, classism, religious intolerance, stealing, all the usual stuff you find everywhere. But the biggest problem was judgment. It came from what they had been taught about God; God judges. Because they felt unworthy they believed they and others were outside of God's mercy and grace. The truth was they were only outside of human mercy and grace. The only thing I know my ministry was for there was to tell them, "God loves you and so do I. No matter what you have ever done, what you are thinking

right now, or will ever do. God loves you and so do I. That will never change.”

You, we can never be outside of God’s love.

Mercy and grace may be attributes of God but in reality they are just another way theologians and human beings separate from the love of God- we slice and dice love to dissect it to understand it and that makes it more and less than what it actually is. It is like the concept of ownership of land which I understand native people do not get. How can you own land when the land owns itself? We humans might need the concepts of mercy and grace to explain what God’s love is. God doesn’t. It’s what Jesus meant when he said, “Love your enemies.” He did not say be gracious or merciful. He did not even say forgive. He said, “Love your enemies.”

It seem as though the stories people in the bible about god’s mercy are all about God reserving punishment. But if we look closer it was the people who really wanted or expected the punishment to happen. Yet God’s love abundantly overrules the disaster. It seems as though all the stories about God’s grace are where people are shown overwhelming compassion in extremis or a blessing where they might not have expected it to appear. But it is always there because God’s love is abundant.

God says all deserve love and wants relationship with all of us. Jesus taught us to learn to love without limits as God loves- even our enemy. Those who “come from outside” always deserve love because no one is ever outside God’s love.

On Palm Sunday Jesus rode in to Jerusalem on a donkey presenting a tableau of God’s peace, while the Roman governor rode in on a white horse playing the *Pax* of Rome. It was a clash of civilizations over power. Is it really any wonder people cowered before the gods of Roman power and oppression, yet cried out Hosanna to celebrate Jesus’ message of the power of God’s abundant love?