

Faith Mennonite Church
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Refining mercy: Bad news become good news
Malachi 3:1-5; Luke 1:68-79

Mercy is a beautiful word. It conjures kindness, forgiveness. But if mercy is needed it means something has gone wrong. Something is messed up. Someone has hurt someone else. And when things are *really* messed up, as they were so often in biblical times, and as they are today in so many places and situations, it's not a matter of just *someone* messing up, it's about lots of people, whole organizations and systems gone awry. Truth be told, there's not a one of us who hasn't messed up at sometime, who hasn't made others angry or sad, or who isn't benefitting in some way from a system that may do much good, but can also cause great harm.

In the Old Testament tradition God's mercy is closely related to times of reckoning. The messengers, the prophets of God, spared no harsh words in pointing out the ways that God's people had failed. These failings were almost always two-fold and related to the community's covenant relationship with God. God had promised loving care and faithfulness and expected a faithful response both in worship and in just and compassionate relationships within the human community, including foreigners and especially the most vulnerable, as in widows and children. The book of Malachi points out the ways that the religious leaders failed to offer proper sacrifices and that the community failed to live truthfully and justly.

In Malachi, the mercy of God does not sweep in and simply cover the wrongs, the impurity. No, the mercy comes like a bar of soap and a refiner's fire. There's a need for some fessing up, for taking responsibility, for taking an active part in rectifying the situation of wrong and harm. It's like sending a kid to the bathtub after finding them totally covered in mud. Hebrew writers often used word plays to draw emphasis. Here, in Malachi, the "Hebrew term for 'soap' (borît) sounds quite similar to the word for 'covenant' (berît)." Old Testament scholar Anne Stewart writes that "Ironically, it is the soap that restores to covenant faithfulness, as the covenant is in some measure a metric of obedience."¹ Covenant relationships are intended to guide and give life. These can only be restored when both parties desire that original goodness and wholeness.

For 18 days in the latter half of November, following the death of Jamar Clark in an encounter with police in North Minneapolis, fires burned in fire pits on Plymouth Avenue in front of the 4th Precinct Police Station. Those fires were not the destructive fires of looting and riots, but we can see them as refining fires. They were created to provide warmth and were tended by members of the community who camped there around the clock, through rain, snow, and falling temperatures, to be messengers. The short message is "Black Lives Matter." Behind those three words is a centuries-old legacy of a broken social covenant, of oppression and injustice that continues to this day.

¹ Anne Stewart, Commentary on Malachi 3:1-4. Working Preacher.com, Dec 6 2015.

Although only several of our households live in North Minneapolis and probably only a minority spent time with the protestors at the 4th Precinct, we are all invited into the refining process that the Black Lives Matters messengers are calling for. We begin first of all by listening, without jumping in to help or fix, but simply listening to the pain, to the reality of poverty and exclusion. We must also do the work of seeking and facing the truth of racial history in this country. A public school education doesn't tell us the full story. We have to dig deeper. And have a tissue box at hand because reading the history is like peeling an onion, it smarts, and when you think you've grasped the truth you will certainly find yet another part of the story that makes you cry. The class that is reading James Cone's book this fall and some of our previous book studies on Native American justice and mass incarceration are important parts of this work. Ultimately, we must seek wisdom in examining if and how we contribute to or benefit from injustice and what steps we must take to interrupt injustice and work to restore justice, to build relationships of respect and trust, to extend the privileges and benefits that so many of us take for granted.

This is the work of mercy! For while the soap may feel abrasive and the fire uncomfortably warm, there is healing in this work. Freedom comes from honest appraisal. It is only when we identify and embrace the things that are out of joint, the things that have gone awry, that we can begin to set things aright. And we have a companion in this work. The One who offers mercy has gone before us and walks with us. Commentary writer Melinda Quivik reminds us that "Jesus does not refine us as in a fire. He died and rose for us; he did not melt us down."²

Now there is much more wrong in our society and the world that any of us can respond to. If we tried to take on everything, we would surely melt down! And some of us are dealing with fiery personal matters that have come to us unbidden and leave us with little energy for engagement beyond ourselves at the moment. This is the beauty of the church, of being part of a body. We don't necessarily all respond in the same manner. Some speak out on the protest lines, others advocate through public policy, many are in professions where you daily encourage and support people who need the care of others to navigate the challenges of life. The one thing we can all do is pray...pray for the grace to receive and give mercy...pray that we will reflect the hope of God's kingdom amidst the current darkness.

As we come to the table this morning, this symbolic place of grace, let us be fed and strengthened to carry forward the Advent hope of Zechariah:

By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness,
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet in the way of peace. (Luke 1:79)

Lord, have mercy.

² Melinda Quivik, "Commentary on Malachi 3:1-4." Working Preacher.com, Dec 9 2012.