"Beyond Restoration: Beginning with Mercy"

Psalm 85:6-11; Psalm 123; Matthew 18:23-35 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – September 27, 2026
Reconciliation Special Emphasis

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be softened by your mercy and our resolve strengthened to share it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Last week, as we began our annual emphasis on Reconciliation Ministry, the anti-racism ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we talked about how the theme calls us "beyond restoration" to put our hope into action, that is, to trust that active faithfulness prepares the ground for revival. As a congregation in need of hope and revival, this is an important thing for us to remember. Today, we are going to push that trust even farther, to reflect on how faithfulness calls us beyond our own need for revival, to imagine a world grounded in God's mercy and steadfast love.

I've been thinking a lot about mercy lately. Or perhaps I've been thinking about the current lack of mercy in our world. But also about how the gospel is clear about our obligation, as followers of Jesus, to practice mercy in everything we do. In order to help us think about what that means, I thought we would do a little case study today and imagine how the world could be different, for at least one group of people, if history had been grounded in mercy, rather than prejudice, violence, and greed.

But before we get into that, I want to take a moment to help us clarify what mercy is. Both of the scriptures we just heard, from Psalm 123 and Matthew 18, imply that mercy usually involves a power imbalance. Mercy is something that someone with power over another person can extend, if they so choose, to that less powerful person. The imagery in Psalm 123 can make it seem as though only God is powerful enough to offer mercy. But the parable in Matthew 18 makes clear that Jesus understands that this mercy-extending or mercy-withholding dynamic can trickle down into the more subtle power differentials that are common in our own lives. Mercy is not something just for kings or lords or bosses. It is something all of us can channel and share, through the many interactions we have with others in every aspect of our lives.

Is it grace? Sort of. Is it pity? It's related. Mercy is what happens when we value human flourishing over human rules and regulations. Mercy is what happens when we recognize the power we have to make someone else's life better or easier and choose to do so, even if conventional wisdom doesn't think we have any obligation to make that choice. It's about throwing a lifeline to someone who's reached the end of their rope. It's about realizing that only random chance has us in the position of privilege while someone else is dependent on our good will to survive. Mercy is about admitting that all of us are indebted to one another in countless, invisible ways, in a world where only some debts are recorded and collected.

So let us turn to our case study. I want to talk about our Haitian neighbors today, both the 12,000 Haitian nationals currently living in San Diego County and the ones still struggling to survive in Haiti, but also the ones who've gone on before – those who were living there in 1492 when Columbus arrived, and those who were there for the Haitian struggle for independence in the 1790s and into the early 1800s, and those that followed them. I want us to think about how the history of the Haitian people could have been different if mercy were the guiding principle of the world.

Let's start just a few weeks ago on September 8th. Renatho Kemsley Casseus was arrested by ICE in a traumatic raid right near the City College campus downtown, in which another student barely escaped. A few days later, a mother and father were grabbed just after dropping off their kids at John Marshall Elementary School in City Heights. All of this happened because in July, our government decided to end Temporary Protected Status for Haitians. That meant that people who had come here seeking safety and followed all the rules for remaining in the States were suddenly being rounded up and detained in prison-like conditions. The Department of Homeland Security issued a statement saying "Temporary Protected Status is exactly that – temporary." And that sounds very logical, doesn't it? Why would we call it that if it weren't going to end someday? But mercy demands that we dig a little deeper. What is supposed to be the standard by which we decide these people no longer need

protection? Temporary Protected Status was created as a category to address the plight of people whose home countries were no longer safe because of armed conflict or environmental disaster.[1] So let's think about the current situation in Haiti. Besides all the news about the ending of TPS, the most recent thing I've read about Haiti is that 18 people were recently extradited to Florida to face charges in the 2021 assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse.[2] Before that, it was new towns being invaded by gangs, in more remote areas of the country. Before that, it was that the gangs had taken over the airport, essentially closing air traffic completely. And that's all since the assassination. And of course, a month after that presidential assassination, Haiti experienced another 7.2 earthquake (August 2021). It was the 7.0 earthquake in 2010, just eleven years earlier, that originally motivated Temporary Protected Status for Haitians in the first place. Are things better? It's a hard argument to make. What would mercy do, in the face of such trials and tribulations? Honestly, I'm not entirely sure. But I'm pretty convinced it wouldn't be a program that starts with the word "temporary". "Mercy" that can be snatched away at any moment is just another way of wielding power over others.

But again, if we talking about beginning in mercy, can we really just dig back to 2010? Our scripture reading today told us a story about a debt that was so large repayment was basically unimaginable. But such debts are not just literary devices that

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[1] https://www.haitiancommunitycares.com/blog/the-history-of-haitian-tps-complete-timeline-1990-2026

[2] https://apnews.com/article/haiti-extradition-us-president-killing-d89d2c4a01eaac41f50c007b4726605b

Jesus invented to make a point. The text note in my Bible, at the point where it says that first slave owed ten thousand talents, notes that one talent was worth 15 years of wages for a laborer. That is an outrageous sum, and we are supposed to recognize that. That was a debt that was entirely unpayable. (The other debt, on the other hand, was worth about 100 days of work.) Jesus picked a number that was obviously exaggerated, because he wanted us to realize that mercy was the only way out of that situation.

But unfortunately, later, some people decided that such debts were a good idea. If you know anything about the history of Haiti, you probably know that it was primarily colonized by France, though the US occupied it between 1915 and 1934. Haiti was, in fact, France's best money-maker of all its colonies. And that was the result of slave labor. In 1790, the population of Haiti was 520,000 people, and 425,000 of those people were enslaved. Thus it was that in 1791, the enslaved Haitians realized there were more of them than there were of the colonizers, and a slave revolt erupted that led to the Haitian revolution that eventually, by 1802, or perhaps 1804, or maybe really 1825, let to Haitian independence. The reason it took so long to get settled was that every other country in the hemisphere was still practicing slavery, and they were not about to recognize the independence of a country of former enslaved people that had overthrown and massacred their former enslavers. Without international recognition, and perhaps more importantly

international trade, Haiti could not move forward as a country. And so it was, in 1825 that the "indemnity payments" were negotiated with France. France agreed to recognize Haiti as a country, if Haiti agreed to pay France $150 million dollars, to make up for the property loss – primarily the loss of slaves, mind you! – that the revolution had inflicted upon them. That original $150 million was supposed to be paid in five annual sums of $30 million. At the time, $30 million was six times Haiti's yearly revenue. The idea was to create a "double debt," that is, to force Haiti to pay a debt that they would have to take out additional loans to pay off. And guess whose banks were profiting off those loans? France, yes, but also the U.S., which led directly to Woodrow Wilson's take-over of Haiti in 1915. The 1825 indemnity payments were a debt of biblical proportion. The final loans used to pay them off were satisfied in 1947, within the lifetime of people in this room. When Jesus invented that proportion, he intended it as merely a literary device to make a point. Colonizing governments, however, saw it as a blueprint for profit, with the additional benefit of scaring off any other restless colonies or enslaved peoples that might be longing for liberation.

How is a country ever supposed to recover from this kind of economic violence? Jesus seemed to think that the only way out is mercy. But that's certainly not what was offered. Haiti's legacy of political instability is directly tied to this debilitating debt, which is directly tied to the enslavement of native and African

people. Who really owed whom in such a situation? What would the numbers look like if France had been required to give back-pay to the generations of enslaved peoples who created all that wealth they exported back to Europe?

If we are going to be people of mercy, how can we look at all that injustice – intentional, carefully devised structural injustice – and somehow offer a response that is labeled "temporary"? The problem is not that Temporary Protected Status was extended too long, too many times. The problem is that it was temporary to begin with. The problem is that the reckoning of debt that truly needed to happen for justice to be served has never even been considered.

Now, I am aware that nobody in this room has much power to re-structure global financial relations and adjustment policies. But we do have the power to respond to the plight of our Haitian neighbors who are being hunted down in our streets right now. We do have enough power to live as people of Christ-like mercy. We can take on the role of those fellow slaves who saw the injustice of the forgiven debtor demanding payment from his debtor and spoke up.

Mercy is an elusive thing. It can rub our sense of "fairness" the wrong way sometimes, because we're taught that following the rules is the most important thing. But that's not actually what the gospel teaches us. The good news Jesus brought us tells us that God's mercy prioritizes human flourishing over anybody's rules, including God's. Mercy is a soft thing, a gentle thing, a lovely thing, but it's also stronger than

most anything else, with the power to transform the world. And if we can open our hearts to it, it can flow through us, straight from the heart of God, out into a world in desperate need of softness and gentleness and love.

We can imagine how the history would have been different if it had begun and stayed grounded in mercy. But we must also realize that it didn't, so we can only begin right where we are, in this present moment. We can pick up the pieces of our shattered history and knit them back together, one merciful act at a time. We can come together with others and connect our individual channels of God's mercy into an aqueduct so that mercy can flow into the most parched places in our community. The gospel demands no less. Hallelujah and Amen.