

## “Community Restoration”

*Exodus 34:6, Lamentations 3:22-23, Galatians 6:1 Matthew 23:23, John 8:2-11*

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**Prayer for Understanding** Holy One, helps us hear you speak. When you bend down and write in the dirt, when you move through the trees, when you wake with the dawn, when you tug on our heart or whisper into our dreams, help us perceive you. Clear out the cobwebs in our ears. Quiet the steady stream of thoughts marching through our minds. Open up space in our hearts so that we can receive your word for us today. With hope we pray. Amen.

The good news is restoration of community. The Apostle Paul wrote: **Galatians 6:1 NRSV “My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.”**

In God’s original creation, everything was in loving relationship, harmony, community, and in sync. The cosmos yielded goodness from the synergy of all being interrelated. Human transgression, rebellion, and sin breaks relationships. God restores relationships so universal flourishing will return for all.

The good news of Matthew states: **Matthew 23:23 NLT “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law, justice, mercy and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things.”** Our top priorities are justice, mercy, and faith. Justice is loving relationships with all people. Justice is everyone belonging, cherished, and appreciated in one worldwide eternal community. Justice encourages each person to share their uniqueness which enhances everyone. Justice is a completed puzzle, each piece in place, each person in relationship, each aspect of the cosmos connected. Justice is shalom, the peaceful, united, restored worldwide eternal family.

Mercy restores every relationship that is damaged. Mercy is compassion. Mercy is grace, undeserved acceptance, unmerited love, complete forgiveness. Mercy is an attribute of God. Mercy relieves suffering. Mercy works through every pain, hurt, and grief, to forgive so every relationship is loving. Scripture declares: **Exodus 34:6 “God is compassion and mercy filled with unfailing love and faithfulness.” Lamentations 3:22-23 “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God’s mercies never come to an end. God’s love and mercy are new every morning; great is God’s faithfulness.”** We are commanded to mirror God’s compassion, love, and mercy. God chooses to withhold judgement and refuses punishment enabling God to heal and mend every relationship, restoring community.

Faith is trust in God’s justice and mercy. Faith has a confident expectancy that God will transform every person and make every relationship wonderful. Faith trusts the goodness in every person, that we all are designed to be interconnected. Faith trusts that God is loving through us to transform every fear into belonging and every hate into love. Faith trusts that God is removing every barrier, limitation, and wall, so all can be united. Faith trusts that God is healing every hurt, wrong, and mistake, so we can enjoy loving relationships with everyone. Faith trusts that God is mending every broken relationship, restoring community. Faith is reliance on love, grace, and joy to make all glorious. Faith is action living the unforced rhythms of grace. Faith is confidence that even when the world is a mess, relationships are shattered, someone hurts you deeply, faith is confidence that God is loving to restore relationships. Our top priorities are justice, mercy, and faith restoring shalom, the peaceful, united, worldwide eternal community. God calls us to do whatever it takes to restore relationships and welcome everyone into community.

“The Things That Matter Most”  
*a poem by Sarah Speed*

I wrecked the family car, an old gold minivan that had traveled every inch of I-95. It had worn cushions and an old school map in the glove box. It held a folder full of mix CDs under the passenger seat and every memory of every family trip and I wrecked it. I called the tow truck while the engine hissed and smoked. I called my dad, my own apologies tripping over themselves to get to the front of the line. I expected to be grounded. I expected a “How could you?” But when I got home that night, my dad held me close and said, “A car is just a car, but you are my child. The only thing that matters is that you are okay.” And I knew it for what it was. It was mercy. It was love. It was the thing that mattered most.

Jesus condemned no one, graciously forgave everyone, restored every offender to the completeness of loving community, and set them free to live abundantly. The good news of John: **John 8:2-11 NLT “Early the next morning Jesus was back again at the Temple. A crowd soon gathered. Jesus sat down and taught them. As Jesus was speaking, the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. They put her in front of the crowd. “Teacher,” they said to Jesus, “this woman was caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?” They were trying to trap Jesus into saying something they could use against him, but Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with his finger. They kept demanding an answer, so Jesus stood up again and said, “All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!” Then Jesus stooped down again and wrote in the dust. When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman. Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, “Where are your accusers? Did not even one of them condemn you?” “No, Lord,” she said. And Jesus said, “Neither do I. Go and sin no more.”**

Jesus’ refusal to judge, punish, and reject was at odds with the religious leaders who strived to enforce the law. The religious leaders perceived Jesus as a threat to established religion, order, and legality. The religious leaders were blind to Jesus’ radical love that fulfills the intent of the law with grace. Have you ever continued an argument, because you wanted to prove that you are right instead of letting it go to enhance the relationship? How do you judge and reject? How do you enforce the law instead of restoring community? How do you perceive problems to be fixed instead of people to be loved? How do you let an issue, position, or way of life divide instead of building relationships on common ground? Have you ever wanted revenge? Have you ever withdrawn from a relationship? Have you ever believed that a person needs to earn something instead of being freely given everything? We likely have more in common with these religious leaders than we want to admit.

While Jesus was teaching at the temple the religious leaders brought a woman caught in adultery to put Jesus and her on trial, to put grace, justice, mercy, and faith on trial. Can you imagine this disruptive spectacle? A woman caught in the act of adultery dragged into worship and forced to face everyone. All eyes are on this woman. Where is the man? Jesus would have been justified to condemn this religion and society that oppressed, burdened, and prosecuted women while ignoring the illegal behavior of men. The religious leaders words are sharp, cunning, and calculated to entrap Jesus. Jesus responds by writing in the dust with his finger taking the focus off the woman and onto his writing. Jesus said: **“Let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!” “When the accusers heard this, they slipped away.”** Jesus is gracious, forgiving these accusers of their sins, forgiving them for trying to trap him, forgiving them for their lack of love, grace, and mercy. Jesus lets all of them go free. **“Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, “Where are your accusers? Did not even one of them condemn you?” “No, Lord,” she said. And Jesus said, “Neither do I. Go and sin no more.”**

Notice the order. First the woman is not condemned and shown grace. She has not done anything to merit forgiveness. She is told to go, be free, and remain free by sinning no more. She, like all people, will continue to sin. God will never condemn. God always forgives. Jesus sees the woman and restores her dignity. Everyone in this account is guilty and yet Jesus condemns no one, is gracious to all and sets everyone free. Jesus defuses the spectacle with justice, mercy, faith, gentleness, and grace. God's transformative grace has more to accomplish bringing the accusers and this woman into loving relationship, bringing all people into loving relationship, bringing people and the cosmos into loving relationship. The Good news is graceful forgiveness restoring offenders to the fullness of loving community and the freedom to live abundantly.

We all make mistakes and need forgiveness. All of us deserve death. God gives all of us eternal life. All of us deserve to be thrown out of the family of God. God is bringing everyone home to God's family. God commands us to graciously forgive others of every sin as God graciously forgives each of us of every sin. Love and mercy are to make every moment a fresh beginning.

Enjoy the freedom of grace. Drop your stones. Drop outrage, judgement, condemnation, legalism, and revenge. Drop shame, blame, guilt, and self-condemnation. What is Jesus calling you to drop, so you are free to go into freedom? How do you stand rigid, with stone in your hand, arguing for the law to punish? How can you repent, turn, change to being gracious, forgiving, and loving of everyone. How do we hide behind the masks of institutions, governments, organizations, religion, being silent, so others do condemnation for us? God is overcoming every separation with grace. How will you partner with God in mending relationships and restoring community?

Pastor Lizzie McManus-Dail wrote: "The inconvenience of mercy is that mercy is hardly ever merited. Jesus talked ad nauseam about mercy in the Bible; telling his disciples they must forgive their siblings seventy times seven times for the same sin (Matthew 18:21-22). Jesus calls the merciful blessed in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:7). And then there are Jesus' words as he is dying, on a cross, surrounded by criminals and his weeping mother and the mob that lynched him: "God, forgive them" (Luke 23:34). Mercy unmerited, inadvisably offered and brimming with foolish hope is the making of a Christ-follower." Pastor Lizzie continues: "I doubt Jesus would talk so much about forgiveness and mercy if it were easy, God tends to repeat what we struggle to listen to.

Mercy is what we ask for when we have messed up so mightily in our relationships, our marriages, our parenting, our friendships, that we face either the death of that relationship or the death of who we thought we were. The receiving of mercy and extending of mercy in the most awful and improbable of places is what makes me know that God is still at work in this world. Mercy is a practice of hoping and knowing that there is more than the thing that hurts us, more than the thing that haunts us. This, too, is how mercy is part of God's justice, for God's justice is God's joy. God's justice does not align with our human metrics of justice and punishment. God's justice is the delight God feels at the lost sheep coming home, the coin being found. God's goodness is not retributive. God's goodness is rooted in goodness propagating in the face of death." End quote.

In the *Letter From Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote: "Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority... We can never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was 'legal' and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was 'illegal.'"

Sarah Bessey wrote: "The woman is not collateral damage. Not in God's eyes. There is never a worthwhile trade of suffering for 'the greater good' in the Kingdom of God. Every life has value,

including hers. In the midst of all their games and entrapment plots and dangerous plans, Jesus never forgot that she was a real person, deserving care.”

The good news is God treats everyone with justice, mercy, and faith and is helping us do the same. The good news is restoring everyone with gentleness. The good news graciously forgives everyone, restores every offender to the completeness of loving community and sets everyone free to live abundantly. The good news is restoration of community. Amen

