

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

7/11/10

Bearers of Mercy

Luke 10:36-37

It is all about mercy. This is the truth that Paul wanted the Colossian church to understand. Paul knew that he was writing to a church that was saddled with the burden of false teachers. These teachers had been promoting within the church a distorted view of the world. They were teaching that our experience of the world is an illusion. They understood our spiritual calling to be leaving the world and its relationships behind. There was no room within this teaching for social responsibility. The plight of the poor simply doesn't matter if the world is nothing more than an illusion.

Paul called on the Colossians to reject this heresy. Christ came to embrace the world with the compassion of God. Christ came to be the embodiment of God's mercy. Our spiritual journey does not call us out of the world but leads us more fully into it so that we can receive God's mercy and offer it to others.

The mercy of God is at the heart of the exchange between Jesus and a lawyer in the 10th chapter of the gospel of Luke. The lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus does not give him a direct answer but turns the question back on the lawyer by asking him what is written in the law. The lawyer then affirms his responsibility to love God and neighbor and Jesus praises him for being on the right track.

But the lawyer wants more from Jesus. Because he works with words and understands the limits of liability he pushes Jesus to define his terms. He wants Jesus to clarify the limits of his responsibility. He is looking for clear boundaries. For this reason he asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor (Luke 10:29)?" Jesus tells him the story of a traveler who is mugged along the highway and left for dead. The man is in desperate need for someone to stop and help. A priest and a Levite, religious professionals whose code of ethics requires them to stop and help, ignore the dying man. It is the cultural enemy, the hated Samaritan who saves the victim's life. Jesus asks the lawyer:

"Which of these...was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy (Luke 10:36-37)."

The lawyer is caught in his own trap. There are no boundaries to our responsibility because there is no limit to God's mercy. This passage makes clear that mercy in the biblical sense is not primarily about the passive exercise of granting pardon or leniency. It is really about the active process of offering compassion, kindness, and generosity. The rescue of the dying man in the ditch is a demonstration of mercy by a man who has mercy in his bones.

I recently read the long newspaper account of the funeral of Albert Hale in 1891. Hale more than anyone else shaped the identity of this congregation during his 27 year pastorate from 1839 to 1867. There was a common thread which ran through the various speeches that were made at his funeral. They all described Albert Hale as a bearer of mercy. When he retired and gave up the responsibility of leading a busy church he was able to give his full attention to doing what he loved most. That was extending mercy to the most desperate citizens of the community. He became a friend,

spiritual advisor, and social worker for those who were struggling to survive. It was Hale's mission to make sure that no one was left for dead by the side of the road.

One of the speakers at Hale's funeral was a minister named F. H. Wines. This is how he described Albert Hale:

His humanity showed itself in...his large sympathy and tender emotions. It showed itself in a desire to stoop to the lowest and most degraded outcasts. He called himself the Bishop of Highways and Hedges, denying thus any rank in the church. His heart was full of tenderness and affection.¹

Wines concluded his remarks by pointing to the Reverend Isaac Carter, the only black man on the chancel stage that day. Carter had come to Springfield during the years leading up to the Civil War. He was an escaped slave from Tennessee. When Hale learned that this newly arrived fugitive wanted to become a minister he took the young man under his wing and trained him for ministry. Wines then told the people who packed the pews that day that if they wanted to understand the character of Albert Hale they should speak to Isaac Carter.²

Today we have commissioned our youth and adults who will soon be headed to New Castle, Pennsylvania to represent this church and our Lord, Jesus Christ. They will be doing what Albert Hale loved best. Remember, it is all about mercy.

Endnotes

1. *Daily Illinois State Journal*, 2 February 1891, page 4.
2. The *Daily Illinois State Journal* reported F. H. Wines' description of Albert Hale's relationship to Isaac Carter as follows:
"Here sits a man," Wines said, "with dusky skin, an escaped slave from Tennessee, who was taught by Father Hale and prepared by him for the ministry," alluding to Mr. Carter, and he could bear testimony too to the grand character of Father Hale.