"Dings, Dents, and Other Perfections"

A Sermon Preached by
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Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian
Cleveland Heights, Ohio

The Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 21, 2025

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Text: “Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.” -- 2 Corinthians 12:7

One of the reasons I gave up being a dean of students was because I lost my appetite for discipline. Not discipline in the sense of an ordered life, but discipline rather as the actual business of punishing students for breaking rules.

After about four years of sitting on the Administrative Board of Harvard College, the body responsible for hearing and deciding disciplinary cases, one day I looked around the room at my thirty or so colleagues and I realized that although I respected them, my knowledge of my own shortcomings, as well as the shortcomings of professional peers sometimes put me in the awkward position of punishing students for breaking rules that I myself had broken or that I knew my colleagues had broken and gotten away with, and here we were passing judgment

on teenagers for sometimes quite minor infractions. And so I could feel the acrid taste of hypocrisy rising in the back of my throat, and I knew that I wasn't long for that job.

I'd begun my career on the Ad Board with a reputation as one of its hanging judges, a member of the law-and-order contingent that would predictably take a tough line of interpretation of a case's evidence and a tough stance at the punishing stage. We hard-liners frequently felt that time away from Harvard College, a student's greatest fear, was a good thing, and we were frequently voted down. But by the time I left the Board six years later, my reputation had softened considerably, and I could usually be counted on to argue the cause of mercy, and of the two reputations, I prefer the latter.

The United Church of Christ, which ordained me, has a reputation for theological softness, a breeziness toward human imperfections that, according to our critics, refuses to call sin sin, especially if that sin has something to do with sex.

"Soft on sin" is the churchy equivalent of "soft on crime" that is still used in the political arena in this country with great effectiveness. Being considered soft on sin is frequently offered as one of the reasons for our denomination's decline. Our decision to support marriage equality, for example, back in 2005, is one of

the most glaring examples of our softness toward sin according to many of our critics.

But we say that God is both merciful and just, and I have to ask the question, What is mercy if it is not soft on sin? Mercy that is hard on sin isn't mercy at all; it's justice. Mercy is nothing if it doesn't overlook something. Punishment that accounts for everything -- punishing in exact measure for every single bit of wrong -- may be called justice, but it's not mercy. Mercy knows that in our fallen world, even when the system has done its best, there is always wrong left over, and mercy knows to leave it behind.

Now, those of a certain mental disposition and firmness of heart -- some would call them orthodox with a lower-case o -- they say that God really is merciful as well as just, for if God were only just, we'd all be destroyed just for being human beings, just for existing. Even before we do anything wrong, we've done something wrong by being born tainted with original sin. We are by nature sinful and worthy of damnation the moment we're born. This was orthodox Christian teaching for centuries.

Once upon a time, some parents lived in a state of near hysterical fear until their infant children were baptized because they were afraid that if they weren't baptized, their original sin would keep them from heaven, and when I was a boy

growing up among the Baptists, I was taught that those who had never had the chance to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ were also, sadly, condemned to hell, and so we'd better redouble our missionary efforts to get the word out to them, too, lest their benighted ignorance be their everlasting damnation.

I believed those things when I was a child, but now that I've grown up, I've given up childish ways of thinking, and I think the doctrine of original sin, along with the doctrine of predestination -- single or double -- as well as the doctrine of salvation-through-Jesus-alone – as these are commonly understood do more harm than good, in my view, and any God who would create human beings to damn any of them to hell on the basis of a human-made doctrine is a monstrous creation not worthy of my devotion. And if I am wrong for erring on the side of mercy, then, as Huck said about his helping Jim, "I'll go to hell then."

I no longer have any patience with a God utterly devoid of genuine mercy, the kind of mercy that you and I experience in our daily lives from those we love and from those we hurt and from those we don't even know. If God isn't able to rise to the level of a stranger who overlooks my bad driving or my impatient tone on the phone or my poor behavior in the grocery store, then I'd say, with theologian Leslie Weatherhead's book, your God is too small. I'm a recovering

theologian, trying to be done with small, man-made gods, and yes, they're largely the creations of men.

Paul knew what mercy was. It came in the form of a thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan, he called it in this morning's lesson. We don't know what the thorn was exactly, and Paul doesn't say. Some think that Paul might've been a repressed homosexual, given the harshness of his pronouncements about certain types of same-sex behavior. Others think he might have been epileptic. Others think he might have been neurodivergent or had a stutter or been in some other way physically challenged. All of this is speculation.

Whatever the thorn was, Paul didn't like it, he didn't want it, and he prayed three times for God to remove it, and God answered his prayers: God did not remove it. For if God had removed that thorn – that irritation, that impediment, that hindrance, that infirmity, whatever it was – Paul would never have become Paul. Instead, he almost certainly would have remained an insufferably self-righteous Pharisee and completely worthless as a missionary for the message of Jesus the Christ.

For Jesus' message is not about moral perfectionism, despite what we Christians have made it into. That message of the cross and the empty tomb is

not about getting it right. That message of the cross is not about going it alone, on our own power, under our own steam, sailing under our own flag.

The message of Jesus Christ is about mercy. It's about honestly recognizing our imperfections, and, more importantly, recognizing how God uses our imperfections to make us perfect – not in our sight, but in God's.

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect," Jesus told his followers, and the context for that instruction, which has driven many a Christian to despair, is not moral perfectionism, it's mercy.

[43]"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' [44]But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," -- that's mercy -- "[45]so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." That's mercy, too.

"[46]For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?" Tax collectors, then and now, are not known for being merciful. Some things really don't change.

"[47]And if you greet only your siblings, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" That's Jesus' condemnation of

like-attracting-like, which gives rise to the ecclesiastical clubbiness that has infected and ruined many of our churches.

And here's the punch line to all of Jesus' talk about mercy: "[48]Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Christian perfection does not come from getting the doctrine right or opposing heresy or separating ourselves from our wandering siblings or agreeing on some carefully crafted resolution, which is the way Christians historically have pursued their perfection.

True Christian perfection comes from showing in our lives the same mercy that God shows for the entire world, without exception, including our enemies and including ourselves.

We Protestant Americans are particularly prone to interpreting the idea of spiritual growth as a kind of building ourselves up stronger and stronger until we're impenetrable spiritual fortresses, strong enough to withstand the assaults of the various temptations that the world spends its time and energy flinging at us.

I've known lots of people who go at spiritual development that way. Not much grace gets through their hard, protective shells of moral rectitude, and even less gets out. They don't have much need of grace, since they've got the bumper

sticker that says, “The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it.” When you’ve got that degree of certainty, you have no need of grace.

I know that that MO works for some people, but the older I get and the more life experience I acquire that is more than superficial, the less inclined I am to see the life of faith as essentially Q&A.

Life isn’t a test; it’s an opportunity. It’s a gift, and the most precious gifts are not those talents and skills with which we think we contribute so much to the world. Our most precious gifts are those imperfections and weaknesses that keep us aware of our own need for mercy and grace and the same need in others and our obligation to meet that need. The late pastor-theologian Eugene Peterson says that “Faith develops out of the most difficult aspects of our existence, not the easiest,” and for those of us who are sincere about walking the walk of Jesus and not simply talking the talk about Jesus, struggling with those difficulties that keep us from our most godlike selves is a lifelong endeavor.

In 1979, Walter Murphy wrote a novel about the first American pope, *The Vicar of Christ*, and here we are, forty-five years later, living what was once fiction. In Murphy’s novel, the brash American pontiff, Declan Walsh elected Pope Francis I, is horrified at the complicity of the Catholic Church in various repressive and brutal regimes, especially in Latin America, and he demands the recall of all

cardinals and bishops operating in those areas of the world. His chief advisor, a wizened old Italian cardinal, advises against such a move, saying, “Holiness, the Church has to take governments as the Church finds them,” to which the American replies, “Yes, but the Church doesn’t have to leave them as the Church finds them.”

To show mercy to those needing mercy is not to give anyone or any government a pass for bad behavior. We all need to be held accountable for our actions, which the Administrative Board of Harvard College did of undergraduates when it functioned at its best. Our government functions best when it does the same of corrupt and vicious governments, including our own. Our legal system functions best when it, too, holds people accountable for their actions while resisting the all-too-human impulse toward vengeance and retribution. Quakers heavily influenced the development of the penitentiary – a place of separation from society for a time for the purpose of rehabilitation and reform – precisely to counter the brutal and humiliating forms of public punishment that were the order of the day in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Quakers saw the downward spiral of an eye-for-an-eye justice system. Such a violent spiral is not broken by more violence, it is broken by grace: the paradoxical strength that comes from what to much of the violent world looks like weakness. And to come

to this life-saving knowledge requires two things: meaningful experience and hard-won wisdom.

When I taught religion and film, two of the films I had to stop teaching were *The Trip to Bountiful* and *Babette's Feast.* I suspect that many of you are more familiar with the latter than the former, but they both require a degree of emotional, psychological, and spiritual maturity for genuine understanding that I came to realize undergraduates don't yet have. Even very bright late adolescents simply haven't lived long enough and have not had enough pieces taken out of them to appreciate the dynamics of loss and gain, suffering and healing, mercy and gratitude, and the mysterious movement of grace that make up the substance of those films. Many of us don't understand the Bible very well for the same reason: we come to it as our best Sunday-school selves, which is as immature moralists, unconsciously thinking that every passage ends, "Go, thou, and do likewise," and so we are often flummoxed by the complexity, subtlety, and nuance of Scripture. A conscience is certainly an asset when it comes to reading the Bible, but an imagination is equally important.

"We need to revalue what we consider to be negative," the Irish writer John O'Donohue says in his book *Anam Cara,* and the German poet Ranier Maria Rilke used to say that difficulty is one of the greatest friends of the soul. Neither

author is referring to a masochistic delight in self-inflicted pain or a lip-smacking wallowing in self-pity, but rather they are talking about “the awful grace of God” that Aeschylus spoke of nearly six centuries before Jesus, the grace that comes to us even and perhaps especially in our tears.

God’s grace doesn’t come into our lives through our strong walls of psychological self-defense or our strong moral armaments or our shellack of self-righteousness. God’s mercy comes in through the cracks, the faults, and through what one of my childhood pastors – an interim minister, as it happened – called the chinks in our armor. That’s where the mercy flows in, and if we’re truly living as God’s perfect children – made perfect by God’s grace with all our flaws and weaknesses – that’s where the mercy will flow out.

“‘My grace is sufficient for you,’ the Lord said to Paul, ‘for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So,” Paul says, “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.”

Having Christ’s power dwell in us because we have given up trying to go it alone and make ourselves perfect under our own power -- having given up that struggle and turned ourselves over to the one who is able to make us strong through divine weakness, and so equip us for this life and any life to come – that self-denying and self-fulfilling turn really is something to brag about.

Let us pray. Help us, Lord, to become sovereign of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take our hands and work through them. Take our minds and think through them. Take our lips and speak through them. And take our hearts, and set them on fire, for Christ's sake. Amen.