

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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Mercy

To the memory of my student, colleague, and friend, Rev. Dan Kane

The quality of mercy is not strain'd
 It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
 Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
 It blesseth him that gives and him that takes....¹

This is Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*. Portia is importuning Shylock to show mercy; Shylock asks,² “On what compulsion, must I?” Portia knows she cannot demand it. The quality of mercy is not strained – meaning it is not forced or compelled by outside forces. Mercy has to come from within, from somewhere deeply embedded in our moral character, from the understanding that as much as showing mercy will bless the person to whom it is shown, it will also bless the giver.

Shakespeare, of course, didn’t make this up. The directive to show mercy – an alchemical blend of benevolence, forgiveness, and kindness – shows up in every major religious tradition:

In Hinduism, a spiritually awakened life leads one to feeling compassion, which, in turn leads to mercy. Mercy, called *daya*, removes bad karma, and is rewarded with *kripa*, translated as grace or kindness. Mercy is also to be extended to animals; for this reason, many Hindus are vegetarian.

In Judaism, YHWH is recognized as merciful: “The Lord, the Lord, a G*d merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”³

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene I

² To be accurate: Shylock has just asked; this is Portia’s response.

³ Exodus 34:6

In Buddhism, Kwan Yin or Kannon is the bodhisattva of mercy and compassion.

In Christianity, Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* tells us, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." If you look up into the balcony to your right at the center window, you'll see Louis Comfort Tiffany's exquisite stained glass rendering of this Beatitude: an angel is breaking a sword over its knee.⁴

And in Islam, "Most Merciful" (al-Rahman) is one of the names of Allah, and "Compassionate" (al-Rahim) is the most common name in the *Quran*.

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Our former intern minister of blessed memory, Dan Kane, did his clinical rotation at a hospital for the criminally insane. On his first day there, he met an older woman called Mary who, like every good person he ever met, was instantly drawn to him. Dan's mother had died; Mary fussed over him, maternally, and he grew very fond of her.

Dan never asked her what she was doing in the hospital. But one day, he decided to look up her records. As it turned out, Mary had murdered her children.

By definition, a mother has to be out of her mind to kill her kids. By law, psychosis explains it, but does not forgive it. The court remanded Mary to remain imprisoned for the rest of her life or four lifetimes, one for each child – whichever came first.

Dan told me that he decided then never to read another chart. He wanted to take his patients as he found them, without the temptation to judge them by their crimes. And he felt that, of all the gifts Mary gave him, including helping to heal the wound of the loss of his mother, the greatest was the blessing of a deepened understanding and experience of mercy.

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I think of mercy in a religious context, but I suspect that most of the world thinks of it in a social or legal context: compassionate behavior shown by someone with the upper hand. My friend, Heidi Brieger, is a judge who hears some of the very worst cases in the Commonwealth, spending the

⁴ Thanks to Mark David Buckles for reminding me!

better part of her waking hours with murderers, rapists, and child molesters. I've wondered a lot about how she does it, how she lives with the ever-presence of evil incarnate. Recently, she told me she has a placard on her bench. Just one word: Mercy.

It was probably French philosopher and playwright, Voltaire, who said, "To understand all is to forgive all."⁵ I repeat it a lot: To understand all is to forgive all. I'm being haunted in the best way by two stories that came across my desk recently, two tales of extraordinary mercy.

The first came across the AP wire from Iran:

"Her son's killer stood on a chair on the gallows, his hands shackled, the noose around his neck. Hundreds crowded outside the jailhouse to see if [the grieving] mother, Samereh Alinejad, would exercise her right to kick [away] the chair ... to hang him.

"But after seven years of dreaming of revenge – up to the last moment that she held [her son's] killer's life in her hands – [Samereh] pardoned Bilal Gheisari. That act has made her a hero in her hometown, Royan, in [the north,] on the shores of the Caspian Sea, where banners in the streets commend her ... mercy. Two weeks after the dramatic scene at the gallows, well-wishers still pass her home to praise her....

"[Samereh says] ... that retribution had been her only thought since her 17-year-old son, Abdollah, was [knifed] ... in a street brawl. 'My world collapsed when I heard about my son's death,' she [says].... "If I pardoned [the killer] and saved him from death, how would I be able to live anymore? ... I told my husband if he were spared, ... I would die.' The Islamic [law's] concept of *qisas* – akin to 'an eye for an eye' – gives [the families of murder victims in Iran and some other Muslim countries ... the final choice over whether convicted killers live or die,' and] the chance to oversee the killer's execution."

Alternatively, "forgoing *qisas* is seen as an act of charity, and a chance to atone for one's sins." This "option to show mercy [is] often in return for blood money payments of \$35,000 or more."

⁵ Voltaire: "Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner." Quoted by (and mistakenly credited to) Evelyn Waugh in *Brideshead Revisited*

Complicating Samereh's grief was the earlier death of her only other child, Amir; he was riding a bicycle when he was hit by a motorcycle. Almost beyond comprehension, one of the boys on the motorcycle was Bilal Gheisari, her older son's murderer.

Samereh "walked slowly toward the gallows.... A blindfolded and weeping Bilal Gheisari [pleaded with] her.... 'Forgive me,' [he said.] 'Show your mercy.' [Samereh] moved in close, face to face, ... [and] slapped him across the face." Then she and her husband, Abdolghani Hosseinzadeh, slipped the noose off his neck. The crowd stood in shocked silence. Some of them broke into applause. The death sentence had been commuted. He will serve twelve years in prison.

Samereh Alinejad refused the blood money that had been raised, donating it, instead, to charity. She feels relief, she says. "This slap made me feel as if all the [bad] blood that had accumulated in my heart over the years suddenly burst and poured out. I became peaceful. I do not think about revenge anymore."⁶

Abraham Lincoln said, "I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice."

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Because the death of a child is an especially egregious offense to the natural order, mercy shown by parents for their children's murderers is particularly extraordinary. This second story of extraordinary mercy is from closer to home.

In February, 1993, Mary Johnson's only child, her 20-year-old son Laramiun Byrd, was shot after an argument at a party in Minneapolis. The killer was Oshea Israel, a drug and gang-involved 16-year-old. He was tried as an adult, sentenced to 25 and a half years, and served 17 years before being released.

⁶ Amir Vahdat, "Iranian mom who sought death for son's killer shows mercy," Dallas News, 5/1/14. Please see dallasnews.com/news/headlines/20140501-iranian-mom-who-sought-death-for-sons-killer-shows-mercy.ece

Initially Mary wanted him locked up. “My son was gone,” she says. “I was angry, and hated this boy.... Hatred, anger, hatred.... I wanted him to be caged up like the animal he was.”

In her misery, she asked if she could meet Oshea. A devout Christian, she felt compelled to see if she could find a way to forgive him.

At first, Oshea refused. Nine months later, he changed his mind. Visiting him for the first time, Mary greeted him saying, “Look, you don’t know me. And I don’t know you. Let’s just start with right now.”

Mary founded a support group and counseled mothers whose children had been killed, encouraging them to reach out to the families of their murderers, who were also victims. “Hurt is hurt,” she says. “It doesn’t matter what side [you’re] on.”

She began to see Oshea regularly. And when he was released from prison, she did something beyond all imagining: She introduced him to her landlord, who, with Mary’s blessing, rented him the apartment next door to hers.

Mary and Oshea are close friends, now, which Mary credits to her deep faith. But she says she has a “selfish” motive, as well. “Un-forgiveness is like a cancer,” she says. “It will eat you from the inside out. It’s not about [the] other person; [my] forgiving him does not diminish what he’s done. Yes, he murdered my son. But the forgiveness is for me.” She wears a two-sided locket with a photo of herself and Laramiun on one side, and Oshea on the other.

For his part, Oshea says, he struggles with all of it. “I haven’t totally forgiven myself,” he says. “I’m learning to forgive myself. And I’m still growing toward trying to forgive myself.” He hopes to prove himself to the mother of the man he killed, working at a recycling plant during the day and attending college at night. He’s determined to pay back Mary’s clemency by being a contributing member of society. These days, Mary Johnson and

Oshea Israel visit churches and prison together, to speak about forgiveness and reconciliation – the power of mercy.⁷

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Beloved spiritual companions,

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It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes....⁸

Samereh Alinejad and her husband, Abdolghani Hosseinzadeh:

Mercy.

Mary Johnson:

Mercy.

May their extraordinary power of example
inform the ways we regard our own injuries
– the ways we hold on to anger and hatred;
– and the ways we let them go –
and consider the life-giving possibilities
of mercy.

⁷ Daily Mail Reporter, “Woman shows incredible mercy as her son’s killer moves in next door,” 6/8/11. Please see dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2000704/woman-shows-incredible-mercy-sons-killer-moves-next-door.html

⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene I