

*Mercy***A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Universalist Congregation****By Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on March 28, 2021**

As our service theme is mercy this month, you can imagine I've been steeped in understanding mercy. We generally think of mercy as forgiveness or compassion. Why just the other night I practiced mercy when Richard cooked dinner. This morning I practiced mercy when my computer took 90 minutes to update. Forgiveness or compassion. Theologically, many seek mercy from a deity. Not so much the Unitarian Universalist. Often, we don't accept the mystical meanings of the word mercy with which this word is usually invested. But we do request mercy from those around us, our government, the systems we must participate in and even from a deadly virus. Mercy as forgiveness and compassion sit well with me, but all month I've been concerned with wanting mercy to be more. I've had this drive in me to go deeper and deeper into the concept of mercy. It is good to allow the word mercy to be taken beyond the borders of pity, compassion, and empathy.

And so, mercy, to me, is a love that responds to human need in an unexpected way. Mercy relates to the other qualities beyond love and forgiveness. Pope Francis once said, "Mercy is visceral. It's something that quite literally changes us from the inside out. I like the notion that mercy calls on our deep inward feelings rather than our intellect. I recently read an article in an old New Yorker. The article celebrated the poetry of the late Israeli poet Yehuda (awme I I) Amichai. The article noted the tone of his poetry calling it more than a tone, but it is a way of being in the world. I thought, "aha! That is the meaning of mercy I've been looking for. Mercy is a way of being in the world. Mercy is our most practical virtue for ourselves and for community building. As our way of being in the world, mercy helps us experience greater compassion and other virtues in our lives, Speak with authenticity and garner respect, Build trust; form and solidify relationships, Reduce conflict by offering alternatives to violent behavior, Recognize and take responsibility for our own mistakes, Honor human needs respecting different boundaries, Facilitate understanding and meaningful connections, Create environments where mistakes can lead to reconciliation, and Confirm responsibilities for accountable next steps. These are actions. These are ways of being in the world.

Mercy is an action that heals and prevents pain, especially appropriate when coming to the rescue of someone in need of relief and reliant on others for it. Mercy is absent in the all-too-common tragedy when those capable of easing pain choose instead to respond with negligence or violence. This is when, in community, those who are able to respond with mercy may resolve problems inherited from those who had failed to act with compassion. Merciful action in community blossoms when individuals take responsibility, together, for the effects of our behavior for ourselves and future generations. The potential for individual responsibility in merciful processes continues all the way through fulfillment stages, as accountability is measured by the problem at hand being resolved or resolving as a result of merciful actions. This process humanizes and connects people around wrongdoings to set things right, in ever greater

spheres of influence, for ourselves, our people, and ever more people, as we expand our capacities to follow through with responsibilities with accountability.

Ram Dass, author of *Be Here Now*, demonstrated how service to others is integral to life and love and to relieve our own suffering. Mercy for self is healing for others as well. He wrote, “To be available for someone else’s suffering you have to be able to acknowledge your own suffering and be able to understand the nature of suffering in such a way that you have converted the quality of suffering in yourself.” Let us ask ourselves, “Am I merciful?” Am I Merciful? Do I understand and forgive myself and others? Do I honor key virtues in myself and others? Do I act upon urges to help others? Do my deeds bring healthy results for others? Do I enjoy the fruits of mercy for myself and others?

Merciful spaces call upon us each to stand with each other when any one or more of us falters. Unlike punitive methods that neglect the needs of those injured, mercy lifts the potential of accountable reconciliation. Unlike punitive methods which dis-empower a wrongdoer from making good, merciful processes create structures within which we can come to terms with the effects of our errors. In punitive environments, humiliation holds us back from assuming ownership of our mistakes. But when fear of punishment is lifted, we tend to acknowledge our own misdeeds and disclose uncomfortable facts, feelings, and thoughts that would typically be withheld, or even be condemning.

Within the safety of mercy, we accept life’s painful lessons and actively transform pain into accountable plans. Again in contrast with punitive methods, with merciful systems we uphold the nobility of people who pronounce self-responsibility and deliver accountable reparations. We all have growing capacities for mercy and plenty of reasons to start – wherever we are – practicing mercy and its three virtues of understanding, forgiveness, and accountability. As we practice mercy, it becomes more natural to us. As we share mercy, we empower each other. And as we take our heartfelt virtues from the center of our lives into our communities, mercy will seep into our collective consciousness.

Mercy is not just an aim of our work; it is in fact an attitude towards life. Characteristic for a life based on mercy is seeing, being moved and getting into action. It all begins with seeing: seeing who the other is, in his or her dignity and uniqueness. Paying attention to the other and opening us towards that other person. That means that we are moved by the other, that we allow the other to enter into our heart.. The other person truly becomes aware of it when we finally get into action, when we make this other person our neighbor and fellow-human. Practicing mercy is not just a charitable activity, it is the fruit of being deeply moved: moved in a fundamental layer of our life. Mercy is life-giving and stimulates what is good. Mercy is opening and challenging, it makes the relationship between people cordial, loyal, hospitable and respectful.

Mercy also requires cooperation. We have to commit ourselves with all we have and are, in order to make mercy become a reality... And we will discover ultimately that this is not enough. Mercy’s definition reminds us that, on the human level, it involves the virtues of compassion and forgiveness. Dr. Janet K. Ruffing, RSM, a Sister of Mercy, reminds us that “compassion is more than a feeling...it also involves an effective response, a remedy or amelioration of concrete suffering.” She writes mercy, as compassion, “addresses the root causes of suffering and also asks questions about our unconscious complicity in these structures.” While Buddhist teacher and clinical psychologist Jack Kornfield reminds us “forgiveness is, in particular, the capacity to

let go, to release the suffering, the sorrows, the burdens, the pains, and the betrayals of the past and instead to choose this mystery of love.” He notes forgiveness doesn’t condone harmful actions and behavior, “it can stand up for justice and say, ‘no more.’ ”We do need others to practice mercy structurally and to be strengthened in our personal attitude. As we’ve learned this morning, mercy is an attitude towards life which needs practice. By silence, reflection, encounters and personal exchange. By caring, by giving and receiving, by simply doing something.

May it be so.