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 Text: John 8: 2-12
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The Quality Of Mercy Is Not Strained

Two paintings hang in the Hoag Parlor that often catch my eye. They commemorate performances of Shakespeare plays that were directed by Rev. Hoag, who served this church as senior minister for fifty years. One of the paintings is for *The Merchant of Venice*. For me, the painting calls forth words offered by the young woman named Portia in the final scene of the play, as she defends Antonio in a court of law. Shylock has been wronged, and he demands a pound of Antonio's flesh as recompense for that wrong. Shylock's plea is harsh, but just: according to the terms set by the law, Shylock should have his pound of flesh. But Portia pleads otherwise before the court, arguing that justice must be tempered by mercy, lest the law harden into a rigid and cruel burden. Here's what she says:

The quality of mercy is not strained;
 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...

Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
 That, in the course of justice, none of us
 Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
 And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
 The deeds of mercy.

Would that Portia was with us now. For the quality of mercy has been strained of late. It has been strained by the three bombshell decisions the Supreme Court handed down over the past two weeks, on guns, on abortion, and on environmental regulations, with more to come, they're promising, before they're through. Next up are LGBTQ rights, and the availability of contraception. The quality of mercy is strained. It has been strained by the callous disregard for democratic norms that have been on display throughout the January 6th hearings. It has been strained by the often hasty judgments meted out on social media. And it has been strained, most of all, in our daily interactions with one another. It was once possible to differ from one another without demonizing or demeaning those with whom we disagreed. It was once possible to trust the basic good will and decency of our neighbors, even if our differences were considerable. It still is possible. But it's become so much harder. The quality of mercy that we extend toward one another has been strained.

My plea this morning is for a renewed appreciation of Portia's insight into the quality of mercy, for the sake of our country, but for the sake of ourselves too. I'd like to approach that quality by sharing two stories with you, one biblical and one personal. Both suggest an alternative to the Christian cruelty that the court has displayed. Both suggest a way of being in the world that may help us to find one another again, to value one another, and to uphold the best

parts of our humanity. Both suggest a way back toward the ideal that Portia modeled in a legal setting, and that we can model in our relationships with one another.

First the Bible. Portia's speech in *The Merchant of Venice* can be read in parallel with the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery from John 8. Indeed, it's a story that is stunningly contemporary in its portrait of violence against women. Note the details surrounding the story: a law regulating sexual behavior; a punishment meted out against women but not men; male accusers with an inflexible and cruel understanding of the law; a woman at risk of death before that law, and before all those men; and a radical teacher, popular for his ability to loosen the iron grip of the law upon the lives of the poor and the marginalized. The teacher, in whom we recognize the very face of God, would have known the law. In such a situation, he would have understood what a rigid application of the law required. But that's not how this God of flesh reads or interprets the law. To those rigid prosecutors, he answers with a stony silence, one that shames them. "Let he (note the pronoun by the way - it is men to whom Jesus is speaking) who is without sin cast the first stone," he says. "Let he who has never made a mistake, who has never felt trapped in an impossible dilemma, who has never colored outside the lines or failed a moral test - let that man throw his rock first." Or to paraphrase a much later legal reading: "In the course of justice none of us should see salvation; we seek and require mercy."

Would that all the purveyors of Christian cruelty - the judges, the legislators, the prosecutors and the jurists - would spend the next several years meditating on that passage alone in all of their Bible studies and prayer circles. In a dustup over the law and its relation to women, Jesus bends the law in order to extend mercy. For those inclined toward a different form of Christian expression than that of Christian cruelty, one far more in keeping with the practices actually discovered in the Bible, I would recommend the story of John 8 as our foundational guide. In such instances, the quality of mercy is not strained, for it drops as gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath.

Now for my second story, this one far more personal. It's about one of my heroes, a person who, more than anyone, has taught me about the quality of mercy. I'm speaking about my Grandfather, on my mother's side. His name was Elbert Smith, but to me he was Grandpa Smith. He too was a minister, in a denomination with Anabaptist roots, called the Brethren in Christ. When I was in elementary and middle school, our family attended the church that he pastored, and he always exuded a wise and gentle perspective. Even at that young age, I was so proud that he was my Grandfather. When I was baptized, at the age of 11, it was he that held me under for just a second and then pulled me up - three times. Over the years, we came to differ theologically and culturally. He was an Eisenhower Republican, who thought that Jesus died to atone for our sins. I became a liberal democrat who thought that Jesus came to show us new and better ways to be human. I lived with my Grandparents for a year after college, and they had ringside seats to the romance developing between me and Rachael. When I purchased the ring that I would give to her when I proposed, Grandpa came along to approve the choice. When we got married, Grandpa gave the sermon, using Genesis 3 as his text. He reminded us to beware of the snakes that sometimes lurk in garden paradises, or marriages - even very good ones. When I went to Yale, he prayed for me, and worried that I would lose my faith. He needn't have worried - I would wind up becoming a minister, in no small part because of what I had learned and observed from him. In 2010 I was ordained, and my Grandpa traveled to New Haven to give the charge. A little later, when I first arrived here in Old Lyme, he came to church one summer Sunday and sat over on the side. I so wanted him to be proud of what I had to say that morning, but afterwards, with a sheepish grin, he confessed that he hadn't caught very much of it. He was a lifelong

insomniac, and hadn't slept well the night before, and so he nodded off. Also, his hearing was shot. But I knew he was proud. Even across our theological and political differences, he was proud. I was too. It meant the world to have him sitting in these pews, sharing this part of my life.

There's a story from his ministry that I've always held onto as something precious, for it upholds a quality of mercy that was not, in that instance, strained. It was in the mid 1980's, and he was pastoring a church that, as the decade progressed, was more and more captivated and enthralled by the Moral Majority - culture warriors like James Dobson and Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. And it was in those years that Evangelical Christians began to rally behind the abolition of Roe vs. Wade. Prior to 1980, Evangelicals hadn't been especially concerned about the issue, but in 1979 a group of strategists recommended that abortion be used as the issue to mobilize Evangelicals at the polls. It worked, and in churches like the one my Grandfather pastored, a vocal minority began demanding a hard line approach on abortion, as well as other issues. Eventually, those voices cost him his ministry.

One day, a woman from the church came to my Grandfather in crisis. She was pregnant, by a man with whom she did not wish to share a future. And she had come to the decision that she would need to terminate the pregnancy. It wasn't an easy or a cavalier decision, but for her, it was the right decision. My Grandfather's - and my Grandmother's - personal convictions ran otherwise. Had it been their decision to make, they would have chosen a different path. They were, as I have said, socially and politically conservative. But they understood something about the quality of mercy. And so on the night prior to the procedure, my Grandparents invited the woman to sleep in their home, and they didn't try to talk her out of her decision. In the morning, my Grandmother made breakfast, and though I don't know for sure, I imagine that at some point my Grandpa said a prayer. Then they all drove together to the clinic. While the procedure was being performed, my Grandparents waited for the woman, and then when it was over, they drove her home and made sure she was comfortable. The quality of mercy was not strained.

I've thought about that story over and over again over the past months, as we've learned about the repeal of Roe vs. Wade. It represents for me the kind of conservatism that seems to have vanished, one that could uphold particular values while still granting another the dignity and autonomy to choose their own path. But I also think it represents a model for us, as we grapple with the chaotic aftermath of this ruling.

What was it that allowed my Grandpa - and my Grandma too - to do what they did in that moment? I think it was because they understood the nature of tragedy. Tragedy is what lies beyond good and evil, in those regions where we're forced to make decisions in which there is no obvious right or wrong, in which hardship and suffering lie in both directions of a fateful crossroads. In such cases, the best we can hope, however we choose, is for the quality of mercy. My Grandpa knew something about that. When he was a boy, his father, my Great Grandfather, traveled the country with a revivalist named Aimee Semple McPherson. People within her organization accused him of financial fraud and embezzlement - rightly or wrongly, we don't know - and he was sentenced to several years in Folsom Prison. It was the occasion of great shame in the family. His wife, my Grandpa's mother and my Great Grandmother, never allowed herself or her children to have contact with him again. He died young, of a broken heart they say. Decades later, in the year that I was living with my Grandparents, a relative found letters that my Grandpa's father had written to his family during and after his prison sojourn, letters that had been hidden away and never read, so as to ensure there would never be a family reunion. I remember my Grandpa reading those letters late at night in his insomnia - just one, every night.

It overwhelmed him, he said. But it helped me to understand that this was a man who had experienced an acute tragedy. And it helped me to sense that somehow, he had responded to that tragedy by allowing it to shape him into a person capable of extending mercy and compassion to others. Specifically, I think it enabled him to allow people to come to their own conclusions, to their own decisions, and to be ok resting in the ambiguity of those twisted and forking life paths. Because he knew tragedy, the quality of mercy was not strained.

Maybe that's what we need as well - as individuals and as a community, but as a country too. Maybe in this fraught and tense moment, we too need to get in touch with the tragedies and pain of our own deep stories, the places where our own lives have inexplicably forked. In so doing, perhaps we can better understand the contingencies that claim us, and that claim other people as well, producing varied and sometimes conflicting life decisions. Having touched those tragedies, maybe we too can grant to others the grace to choose what they would choose, the dignity to think as they would think, the mercy to be who they would be.

Because tomorrow is the 4th of July, I'll close with the words of a country lawyer who, like Portia, was well acquainted with the powers of both tragedy and mercy. In his first Inaugural Address, in a moment as fraught as the one we're facing today, Lincoln claimed the spirit of both Portia and the Jesus of John 8. Here's what he said:

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching...to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

If I celebrate tomorrow, I shall celebrate those words from our 16th President. If I celebrate tomorrow, I shall celebrate the quality of mercy discovered by Portia, enacted by Jesus, and embodied in the story of a decent and good man who I loved. In each of them, there is a quality of mercy that is not strained, a quality we desperately need, a quality that we may still claim. May we claim it - today, tomorrow, and through whatever dangers, toils and snares we may be forced to endure.

“We do pray for mercy; and that same prayer doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy.” Amen.