

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

February 5, 2022

BLESSED:
Outstretched Hands
Dr. Jo Forrest

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During the Middle Ages when someone sneezed, you said “bless you,” to ward off illness. Over the centuries this superstition survives, we say “bless you” as a reflect to these allergic reactions.

Or, we might say, “bless his heart” when we learn about another’s burden. Except in the deep south. That phrase masks a condescending intent, recognizable in the tone of voice, “bless his heart” implying he doesn’t measure up, he’s a fool, no one will take him seriously.

We casually throw around the word “blessing” to the point of hollowness.

When Jesus blesses his first followers in the Gospel of Matthew, he speaks for God.

Jesus’ blessings proclaim present and eternal security to a group of people with neither political power nor spiritual virtuosity. He wants those previously mocked or excluded to know that God includes them in the heavenly realm.

This is the second of a four-part series Ed Sutter and I will preach to explore who Jesus blesses and why, so we can try to look at others through his eyes and maybe restore our world to be more pleasing to him and inhabitable for us.

Please pray with me.

Holy God, As the psalmist wrote centuries ago, we do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from your lips. Too often we feast on junk food of ideas that turn us to crave more

junk. We know that you alone give us the words to eternal life. Make us hungry to devour, to savor, and to be nourished by the words your son spoke. Amen.

Matthew 5:7 (Jesus said) "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."

Roman Mars is the voice and producer of the podcast 99% *Invisible*, one of the most popular podcasts across all platforms. The premise is simple: he pursues the stories just below the surface, somewhat invisible. "Baked into the buildings we inhabit, the streets we drive, and the sidewalks we traverse" is a universe of hidden design that impacts how we live. Sometimes these designs save our lives without our even noticing.

He startles us to see that original design criteria for traffic lights to flood mitigation, and cycling lanes to manhole covers meticulously seek to accommodate and safeguard human life. These podcasts tell the story behind these designs and, very often, the way they've been corrupted over time.

Some episodes appeal to my inner-geek, curiosity about how and why something works. Other podcasts spark my interest about the people whose ingenuities create a more livable world.

For example, a recent podcast describes the designs of a road and a street.

We drive both roads and streets every day and likely never notice roads by definition are wider and likely allow faster speed limits. A road prioritizes getting people from one place to another on a stretch of pavement with minimal pedestrians. Think of Washington Road: I never want to walk my dogs next to the road, for fear of the speed and volume of cars.

By contrast, streets prioritize people being in that place rather than merely getting through the place. Good street design considers first and foremost how people move outside of a vehicle rather than just a vehicle moving. Think of a main street. Literally. In a well-designed city or village, the main streets' wide sidewalks encourage people to walk between the bakery and the bank and office. It's hard to find parking and usually expensive.

As a young traffic engineer Chuck Marohn describes being handed a manual of standards, the received wisdom of how to design these and all other types of lanes, highways and byways.

He said, "when this knowledge was given to me, it was given to me as...you would give any sacred text. 'Here is our code of being, and this is the way we do things.'"

That's no longer the case.

Newer designs for communities and connecting people and places collapse roads and streets, he calls them "stroads," since they compromise on automobile mobility – getting cars

– to the destinations with an “afterthought to humanity,” even though people also move about on these stroads.

He actually said, “an afterthought to humanity”? That phrase stings. It might be a driverless car on this stroad, but even a driver-less car’s purpose is to serve humanity.

The podcast continues with all the challenges of traffic designers trying to navigate wide thoroughfares connecting strip malls and turning lanes, bike lanes, handicap accessible, and doing so with the often-conflicting constraints of how tax money may or may not be spent.¹

The original standards for roads and streets might have been 99% invisible to most of the population, yet our lives flourished because the designs helped us, all of us, navigate on foot or in the car, safely.

Now, we drive on roads, stroads, throughways with an aggression implying the road should be our exclusive use. We shake our fists at one another, or worse. We get in more fender benders. Pedestrians and cyclists take their lives into their hands, competing for access.

As the designs became warped over time or were abandoned altogether, we feel a drastic impact. It’s becoming every person for themselves. Not safe.

¹ Roman Mars, “Mini-Stories, Volume 16, *99% Invisible*, transcript page, February 1, 2023, <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/mini-stories-volume-16/transcript/>

Let's think about another design.

At the beginning...at the very beginning of all time, God designs us as very good, implanting a divine spark into each one of us. Remember the scripture, "God creates humankind in God's own image"?

God blesses the aged and childless Abraham and promises him offspring as numerous as stars in the sky. This patriarch receives the blessing and bequeaths it to us. By design, God's blessing extends to us and through us.

Throughout scripture we read stories of God shaping our lives to love God and neighbor. To "love God" keeps us from loving our idols. To "love neighbor" opens us to see more of God as we create communities and receive love in return. God literally loves us into being through one another. No limit on love. No limit on community. No boundary to exclude.

The Ten Commandments, given by God, may sound stern with the "thou shalt" and "thou shalt nots," but their purpose guides us towards good living. Perhaps we'd embrace these more readily if we call them the Ten Best Ways.

These and other laws in the Hebrew scriptures bless us by teaching us to love God and neighbor. And, when we fall short of living in these ways, justice becomes the way God puts us back into right relationship with God's self and one another. God's justice never ignores the shortfall as it seeks to repair the breach.

God's mercy encourages us to change our hearts and lives. Mercy inspires the justice to restore our potential to love God and neighbor. That's God's grand design for us to thrive.

The ancient prophets remind us; "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

Mercy stands alongside justice, sometimes as justice's opposite, sometimes to encourage justice.

Thirteenth century theologian, Thomas Aquinas wrote "justice without mercy is cruelty, while mercy without justice is the mother of laxity."²

It's been a perennial problem to balance these.

Mercy began to evaporate from our landscape when we glorified our achievements, hoarded our wealth, amassed power to coerce more the former and the expense of others. Mercy fades when people choose to believe "I am not going to be loved without my ability to prove it."

Mercy lost its voice when the idea, "I'm not going to let another receive what I struggled to achieve or receive" ground away a sense of community. A culture that celebrates survival of the fitness negates any sense of mercy.

² Rebekah Eckland, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2022) 176. Eckland's book nudged this four-part sermon series the insightful historical interpretation and clever contemporary comparisons.

That leads to focus on the shortcomings of others, to demand justice as punishment, not corrective. Hold to the letter of law, and maybe twist the law so it discriminates against the minority.

Perhaps this is why Jesus blesses the merciful, just after he blesses those who are hungry and thirsty for justice. They go hand-in-hand, justice and mercy.

Mercy, without disputing the law, looks into the face of the guilty, into the depth of his eyes, and sees a goodness to be restored. Mercy sees a person even in a criminal.³

Jesus blesses those who are able to look at the hurting world with mercy by giving them more mercy. Later Jesus professes that the law stands, as he responds generously whenever asked, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy” and heals.

I believe mercy is at the heart of a vibrant community and Jesus invites us to be strong and merciful. The merciful get so wrapped up in God’s mercy that they see sin and suffering differently. They see those who are at the mercy of others, whether in need of food, shelter, a second chance and then lose interest in sin, so fascinated by God’s mercy. Is there is anything more telling than an empty tomb to demonstrate this?

³ Alexander Schmemmann, “Talks on the Beatitudes,” *The Wheel*, translated by Inga Leonova, Fall 2015, 55-57.

Right now, it looks like the goal of political rhetoric is to keep everyone angry, keeping score. But, underneath this anger is almost always fear.

So look under the cover. What's inherent in the design? Who benefits and who loses? I don't think God intended the balance between mercy and justice to be 99% invisible. Just the opposite, God wants mercy and justice to be part of the fabric of loving God and neighbor. But, as fear and injustice supplanted mercy, this grand design seems to be fading away.

Let's go back to the basics. Receive a blessing as God's gift. Be merciful.

How? A 16th century merchant and theologian described mercy as a "stretching out of the hand," with food for the poor, hospitality, and forgiveness.⁴ To stretch out your hand describes the wideness of mercy and the way it fuels all aspects of our lives. Restore mercy to its rightful place in God's design. Stretch out your hand. Open your heart. Be blessed with mercy.

⁴ Eckland, 171.



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