### “Blessed Are the Merciful” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Jan. 29, 2023

**Micah 6:6–8**

6 “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old? 7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” 8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

**Matthew 5:1–10**

1When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

These are some of the most beautiful and appealing teachings in the Bible. In the first reading, we hear the prophet Micah making fun of the sacrificial system, at least the bombastic and showy aspect of it, the multiplying of displays of wealth in the “thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil,” spiraling out of control as the imagined speaker intends to offer up his own son, “the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul” (6:7). Such a show is not what the Lord requires, but rather simple justice, kindness, and a humble and close walk in relationship with God. It is spiritually pure enough that it could fit right into the New Testament, yet there it is, in a prophetic text seven centuries before the Christian era.

You get that same spiritual purity in the Beatitudes of Jesus’ teaching, a series of spiritual qualities and attitudes: spiritual poverty or sincerity, mournful compassion, meekness, hungering for truth, mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking, and ability to endure persecution. Haven’t you experienced these at some point in our life?

You could organize the Beatitudes into groups. You could look at some of the sayings as describing fundamental spiritual qualities: humility, truth-hunger, meekness toward God, and purity of heart. These are necessary qualities of faith, spirituality, and brotherly love, and they all bring real spiritual results. Then there is a change with the saying “Blessed are those who mourn” and again in “Blessed are the merciful” because those are starting to describe not just brotherly love, but the Father’s own attitude, followed then by the blessing on peacemakers, and on those with the ability to persevere through persecution. The Father’s merciful kindness and care for others comes through in at least those four Beatitudes: the mournful or compassionate attitude, the merciful or understanding attitude, setting about to make peace, and standing up to persecution without any attitude of revenge.

Fatherly love is more parental, far-sighted and concerned for others than is mere brotherly love. So we have some beatitudes that are spiritual and sincere and encourage brotherly love, then we have some that are even more highly spiritual since they have to do with the far-sighted caring and fatherly attitude.

Do we see the same distinction between brotherly love and fatherly love in the Micah passage? Doing justice can have either a brotherly or a fatherly aspect, as can lovingkindness. Walking with God will tend to move one on to the higher level of fatherly love. So I see the first two of the exhortations in Micah being capable of being practiced in either a purely brotherly or in a fatherly way, but the third exhortation definitely nudges one toward learning more about God’s attitude, and thus learning about fatherly love.

Let’s look again at those Beatitudes that have a fatherly thrust. “Blessed are those who mourn” means those who develop a deep compassionate attitude. These are the kind of people who can become caretakers of the nation, like First or Second Isaiah or Jeremiah. Moses would be another example of someone whose compassion was part of his leadership style. He was definitely like a father to his people.

The saying “Blessed are the merciful” focuses on the Godly quality of pity and patience with lowly mortals. An example of mercy was in the behavior of Corrie ten Boom. Corrie was a Christian writer from the Netherlands whose family was sheltering Jews during World War II. The Nazis found out and Corrie was put in a concentration camp. She managed to survive and became a well-known writer and speaker after the War. She was giving testimony in Hamburg one evening, talking about the mistreatment and humiliation that prisoners had faced, when she froze in mid-sentence, because she recognized a face in the crowd. To her horror, the person began walking towards her. He had been a prison guard who had humiliated her. He reached out his hand and said “Corrie, can you forgive me?” She reached out her hand and shook his. She had the strength to forgive him. (Veritas community website, under “Blessed are the merciful”). I hope this changed his life, but I really don’t know.

Also on the fatherly love front, we have “blessed are the peacemakers.” The peacemaking function speaks of a person who cares for others and wants them not to do harm to each other. And the one who undergoes persecution becomes a representative and a leader of the community, even from prison.

Perhaps summing up all this discussion of fatherly qualities is the idea of being a peacemaker. A peacemaker is someone who works against divisiveness and factionalism. A peacemaker tries to exemplify and therefore to instruct people in the ways of understanding and tolerance. A peacemaker encourages people to listen to each other. He or she may be like a mediator who not only hears both sides, but tries to get both sides to hear each other. And they will be called children of God. They are acting like their Spirit Parent.

They bring out the ability to stand for principle without treading on one’s neighbors. They empower that rare quality of broad and patient understanding that enables diverse people to adopt friendly attitudes toward those who think differently. They make possible the beating of swords into plowshares, and for people to learn war no more.

There is a pastor in Tucson named David Drum who observed that there is an ongoing war in our society between donkeys and elephants. He has been holding meetings where people learn to share and talk to others who hold differing views, and try to realize what Jesus meant when he prayed “that they may be one even as We are one” (John 17:11). They have real, substantive discussions, while also keeping Jesus’ ideal of spiritual unity in mind. I know about Drum through the uplifting book he wrote called *Peace Talks.*

He made some friends in Tucson, starting with Pastor Musekura, a refugee from Rwanda, who founded a group to try to achieve reconciliation and peace in Rwanda. He made another friend in Tass Abu Saada, a former PLO fighter who became a Christian who now works for reconciliation between Arabs and Jews. Together, they have discussed the human tendency toward groupishness or tribalism which contributes to group hostilities. He also takes part in the group called Make America Dinner Again, which pairs up Republicans and Democrats over a meal and encourages them to talk about politics, but to seek understanding rather than triumph over the other. Through these efforts, Drum and his friends are peacemakers.

Fatherly love is compassionate, shows mercy, makes peace, and can undergo persecution for the sake of truth. It is my hope that you have experienced many moments of receiving both an earthly father’s love and the heavenly Father’s love. Can you recall these moments? Was it a quiet conversation, a simple gesture, or a moment when you expected to receive discipline or criticism but received mercy instead? These experiences stand out like jewels sparkling in our lives. May we all learn from these moments to generously respond with kindness and mercy to others. May you always get to practice compassion, mercy, and peace in *your* life, and never have to face persecution.