

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on October 28, 2018 (Proper 25B)

If you stumbled upon a magic lantern, and were granted three wishes, how would you use them? You know the kind of lantern I mean. Depending on your age, think “I Dream of Genie” or “Alladin.” The kind that if you rub it enough, the big green genie emerges and grants you three wishes. The possibilities are limitless. The only thing you can’t wish for, of course, are more wishes. Even genies have some rules and regulations.

For most of us it may be a bit embarrassing to realize what initially pops into our minds when we’re asked the question about our deepest desires. Our wishes usually begin with issues of self-improvement or self-enrichment or self-preservation and only then do we begin to think beyond ourselves. Maybe out of guilt we reserve the last wish for something like world peace or the eradication of global hunger. If we’re honest with ourselves, we recognize that our first instincts aren’t necessarily the most honorable ones. If you bought a lottery ticket this past week, dreaming of winning that 1.6 billion prize, you may have played out some of these fantasies in your own mind. And it’s fun to dream!

But before your genie wishes go to money or Prince Charming or a new yacht, I should mention that there’s a caveat to these wishes. I’m going to narrow the focus a bit and limit your wishes to the spiritual realm. Also, you only get one. Because this is my sermon and the genie is kind of cheap. So, what would your spiritual wish be? Internal peace? A conversation with Jesus? The gift of healing? An end to doubt? Maybe it’s speaking in tongues — though that probably wouldn’t go over so well here at St. John’s.

Over the past three Sundays, in our gospel readings we have heard people approach Jesus with various requests, as if he himself were some sort of genie. Two weeks ago, we heard the rich young man approach Jesus and ask him for eternal life. Last week James and John come forward asking Jesus to grant that they will one day sit at his left and right hand in heaven. Their spiritual wish is for glory. And this morning the blind beggar Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus asking for mercy.

Mercy is an interesting selection for a spiritual wish. One that likely wouldn’t be among your top choices. What does it mean to crave mercy? How do you even define mercy? There’s that game I used to play with my brother where we’d try to twist the other’s hand backwards until one of us cried, “Mercy!” That’s not necessarily what we’re talking about. Mercy is a word we throw around a lot in church and it’s all over the Bible. We hear phrases like, “the mercy of the Lord is everlasting” and “God’s mercy endures forever” and “Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy.”

To be merciful is to relent. But it’s more than just stopping that which is painful. It is to acknowledge that a painful situation exists and then offering relief. It is an act of mercy, for instance, to help a person in need. Someone who is struggling emotionally or financially or spiritually.

On a global level, mercy is one of the defining characteristics of God. “The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger, and of great kindness,” the Psalmist proclaims. Full of compassion and mercy — to be compassionate is to show mercy, and to be merciful is to show compassion. Compassion and mercy are two sides of the same coin, pointing towards the reality that, ultimately, mercy is about love. When we crave God’s mercy, we are craving God’s love. The painful pre-existing condition that demands mercy is our own sinfulness, our unworthiness. It is into this condition that God showers us with mercy. Not because we have earned it, or deserve it, but because God’s loving grace is poured out upon us, made manifest through Jesus Christ. And so in seeking mercy, Bartimaeus is craving, is *crying out* for God’s love.

In many ways, the world is crying out for mercy these days. Just this past week, a white supremacist killed two African-Americans in Kentucky, a man in Florida targeted people he disagreed with politically by sending them mail bombs, and an anti-semitite murdered 11 Jews and wounded countless others when he opened fire inside a synagogue. You can’t help but cry out for mercy when hate and violence shatter the sanctity of our common humanity.

The Synagogue in Pittsburgh where yesterday’s shooting took place was called the Tree of Life. In the Judeo-Christian tradition the image of the tree of life comes from the Book of Genesis. There are two trees named in the first book of the Bible: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That second tree is the one which Adam and Eve famously ate from, causing them to be banished from the Garden of Eden. After the fall, God forbids Adam and Eve from eating from the tree of life, as they are no longer worthy for having disobeyed God.

The Tree of Life is an ancient image teeming with hope and possibility. It brings us back to the garden, to a time of unfettered joy and unity and abundance. And yet it feels so remote and inaccessible when the sin of hate and prejudice run rampant in our midst, causing pain and sowing division. Tearing people down rather than building them up. Destroying fellow children of God, people made in God’s image, violating the sanctuary of a house of worship. The Eastern Orthodox Church has traditionally understood the tree of life as prefiguring the cross of Christ. But in order to get there, in order for us to enter that place of hope and glory, our own fears and prejudices must first be crucified and driven out.

And it’s on us to stand up to bigotry and violence and cruelty when it rears its ugly head. To name it and to shine a light upon the darkness in our midst. We may not be able to control the external circumstances when the Pandora’s Box of hate is opened. But we can surely control our response to it, and react with vigilance when it arises. That’s what it means to be a disciple of Christ in a sinful and broken world. We pray, and then we stand up in the face of injustice and hatred.

And in the meantime, we cry out for mercy. Mercy for ourselves, mercy for the victims of violence and degradation, mercy for those who grieve, mercy for one another. We’re all in this together. Regardless of race or creed or religion, all of humanity cries out for mercy. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.