



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Loving Mercy”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

Hear my prayer, O Lord, let my cry come unto you. Psalm 102

*Teach me to feel another's woe, to hide the fault I see, that mercy I to others show,
that mercy show to me. Alexander Pope*

Only love is big enough to hold all the pain of this world. Sharon Salzberg

Sermon

I want to thank our Volunteer Recognition Team for thanking all who assist in this congregation's Pastoral Care. Pastoral care is a significant ministry of the heart and hands and contributes greatly to our sense of community. I also want to thank all of you who make UUFA a significant community we can be proud of.

In fact, when the Volunteer Recognition Team started collecting names of people to thank, they quickly became overwhelmed. Instead of 5 minutes it could have been 50 minutes to cite everyone who has contributed care in some way for another person during the year. What a great testimony for this Fellowship.

As you may know, we cluster different areas of congregational life under different Lay Ministers. The Fellowship Ministry cluster includes several ways we relate to one another. Besides Pastoral Care it includes Fun social activities, Membership, Sunday morning Hospitality (aka Coffee and Clean-up which, by the way, could use more volunteers), and more. In coming months other ministry groups also will be recognized.

The term Pastoral Care comes in part from the Latin word *pastoralis* meaning shepherd. A pastor or minister is one who cares for a flock like a shepherd cares for her sheep. Sometimes this particular flock seems less like wooly sheep and more like a certain feathered flock, what's called a peep of chickens. Or perhaps a furred flock known as a clowder or litter of cats.

I find the history of words informative, so I often refer to an online etymology dictionary. When I entered 'pastoral care' into the search field, I received results for each word. Under care I learned our English word comes from the Old English *carian*, meaning to grieve or feel concern, and from the Early Germanic *karo*, meaning lament. A lament is a cry or moaning.

The Psalms in the Bible are a collection of songs, including many laments that voice a person's or peoples' cry to God for mercy or relief. For example, Psalm 51 begins:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

This psalmist wants forgiveness for the wrongs he or she has done. Mercy here is undeserved forgiveness.

Yet other psalms protest undeserved suffering. Psalm 102, 'A Prayer of One Afflicted', begins:

Hear my prayer, O Lord; let my cry come unto you.
Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress.
Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call.
For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace.
My heart is stricken and withered like grass; I am too wasted to eat my bread.
Because of my loud groaning my bones cling to my skin.
I am like an owl of the wilderness, like a little owl of the waste places.
I lie awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop,
All day long my enemies taunt me; those who deride me use my name for a curse....
My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass.

Vivid isn't it? This lament makes me feel for the person crying out. I'd like to end the person's suffering. The singer acknowledges pain and calls for God, if not us, to respond with compassion to end the suffering.

But what if we shift the viewpoint and make it our voice that's crying out. Can it speak for us in our own time of suffering? Have you ever felt like crying out for mercy, whether to God, the Universe, your family, or to humanity in general? Have you cried out until someone heard your pain?

Few of us readily speak up when we're sick in body, mind, or spirit. If we don't speak up, then we suffer alone, multiplying our pain. Being part of a community like ours means we need not suffer alone.

When I suffered from fairly normal teenage angst I doubt I cried out, but I know I sang out. Song and music provide great physical and emotional release from the pain of the human condition. I remember finding great solace in belting out songs as I played Bette Midler's 'Divine Miss M' album. Her vocal strength and energy entered into me, strengthening me. Music offers a powerful way to release emotions we otherwise would keep bottled up inside us. We even have a musical genre called 'the Blues' which expresses pain and suffering. It's no surprise that African Americans drew on African music in developing the blues from the pain and suffering they experienced during enslavement, and later by racism and other oppressions. Music breaks open our hearts and lets us acknowledge pain in ways we might never openly speak of.

I wish my mother had turned to music for solace because she didn't cry out for mercy when she needed to. Her entire life was dedicated to being able to stand on her own two feet. Independence was her God. She orchestrated her life so that she wouldn't need anyone, wouldn't be a burden to

anyone. When I was growing up she taught me and my sister how to be independent, too. She would even test us.

For example, she gave us instructions on what to do if we came home from school and she wasn't there for some unexpected reason. We were told to go to a neighbor's house until she came home. To test us she sometimes would intentionally not be home. She might only be down the street, but she wanted to make sure we could handle ourselves in an emergency. Well-taught, we did as we were told. It wasn't until much later that my mother confessed her secret manipulations.

In her last year of life my mom suffered from vertigo. If she opened her eyes she'd feel nauseous because the world seemed to spin around her. If she stood up to walk, she'd fall over because she was unsure where the ground was. But she never wanted me or my sister to help. As a result, her world shrank, limiting her to a bed and a living room chair—she did at least let my father help her get there and to the bathroom. My mother lived in vertigo Hell for over a year, and if she ever cried, she never let on to me or my sister.

After a visit to the hospital where she hoped, yet again, for medical relief that never came, my mother decided she could take no more. At 89 years of age, she stopped eating and taking in fluids. Within two weeks she was dead. The inner strength it took her to do that still amazes me, yet she didn't have the strength to cry 'Mercy'.

I don't know why independence was so important to her. I just know I hope never to feel I can't cry out for help. I hope you never feel you can't cry out for help, too.

The dominant Euro-American culture, my white culture, doesn't make crying out easy. We're encouraged to be self-sufficient. Needing help is a sign of weakness and the weak are not rewarded for their weakness. We're taught, as I was taught, to be strong and bravely face our troubles. In games we're allowed to cry 'uncle,' a children's cry for mercy when we can't win. But crying 'uncle' makes us losers, and nobody wants to be a loser.

I know I'm making broad general statements about my white culture, but my black and brown friends tell me their cultures don't share this same ethic of independence. Their cultures endorse community and interdependence more than mine. I think my culture has something to learn from more interdependent communities.

Our First UU Principle affirms that all persons should be treated with respect and dignity, which for me means with love. But do we treat ourselves with love? Do we allow ourselves to be assisted by others? When one of you comes home from the hospital and we ask if you need anything, we're often told, "No". Like my mother, some of us have a hard time accepting help.

Fortunately, not everyone says, "No." So let me say "Thank you" for allowing us to help. Although to some it may seem like an inconvenience, allowing you and me to help contributes purpose and meaning to our lives. It's good to be needed. And, the help you give one day may be returned to you as the help you need another day.

Please continue to speak up when you could use a helping hand or listening heart. And, when we ask for volunteers to just that, please speak up then, too. We wouldn't be much of a community if we ignored what's going on in each other's lives. Fortunately you are generous with your time, as evidenced by how many of you stood up earlier. What a blessing.

Life isn't easy. As the Buddhists tell us, life consists of suffering. But showing compassion, as you do, eliminates some of that suffering and helps make all of us happier. Showing compassion for yourself also can make for greater happiness. Self-care, self-mercy, is important and vital; not an extravagance.

And when your spirit is weary, take time to renew yourself. Jump off the seemingly never-ending treadmill, slow down and breathe. If you do, you'll have more energy when you jump back on. For some of you, coming here on Sunday may be your self-care. With that in mind, we try to offer a time for everyone to simply breathe, as well as a time to receive a smile or a hug, a time to make a new connection, and, of course, many times to let music touch your soul, heal your wounds, and perhaps empower you to carry on.

May our hearts continue to be open and ready to feel; our ears ready to hear; and our hands ready to respond to cries for mercy. And, may you never be afraid to cry out in the midst of any pain or suffering you might have.

Spirit of Love, hear our prayer.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. How do you care for yourself? Do you turn elsewhere for help and if so, to what or whom?
2. Share your feelings about a time you showed mercy to yourself or received it from another.
3. How does a heart become merciful? Where does mercy come from?