

The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

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"THE UNSTRAINED QUALITY OF MERCY"

Text: "Happy is the one who is kind to the poor." -- Proverbs 14:21b

"The Unstrained Quality of Mercy" . . . Most of you will recognize the words of our Sermon Topic. They come from Shakespeare, spoken by Portia as she speaks to Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. They arrive in a discussion on brotherhood, in one of William Shakespeare's finest plays. *The Merchant of Venice* touches the hypocrisy and prejudice of the people of his day. It more than hints of how mercy can disappear in the daily round; and that people, no matter what they say, normally cut the issue and act in favor of themselves.

I first saw and learned the poem from which our title comes, when I was a boy, going back and forth to the Carnegie Library in the shadow of the Cathedral of Learning of the University of Pittsburgh, where I later became a student; and, where still later, on our first date, I took Peggy to the library (Talk about big spenders); and where still later, I used to take our children to the museum and art gallery over that way. The words are carved on a bronze monument, facing the library entrance, about twelve feet high, with a statue of Minerva, the Goddess of Mercy, in bronze relief, and a Horn of Plenty overflowing at her feet. Outside the Bible they could be the most beautiful and lovely words in all of literature:

"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.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes

The throned monarch better than his crown.
His scepter shows the force of temporal
power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this scept'ed sway
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest
God's
When mercy seasons justice."

The unstrained quality of mercy is twice blessed. It blesses those who give and those who take. It surely does. Each act of kindness we offer, each blessing we give, comes back double to help us on our way. Today I want you to think it through in your own life. Our text gives the hint of how to find deeper happiness.

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The message of today's sermon would be relevant at any time. I chose to offer it today because of the recent death of a beautiful woman out in India, a living Saint, who all her life long ministered to the poorest of the poor. The Pope said she marked the history of this century with her love. She was born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu in 1910, in Albania, Macedonia, just north of Greece. Her father died when she was very young. When she was a teen, she left her mother and sister to join a Roman Catholic order, the Sisters of Our Lady of Loreto. There she took the name of Teresa. She went out

to serve with them in India. Sadly, she never saw her mother or sister again. At first she was a teacher in St. Mary's School in Calcutta; later she became the principal.

Then, one autumn day, September 10, 1946, on a walk at the foothills of the Himalayas, something extraordinary happened. (Has it ever happened to you?) She heard an inner voice telling her it was time to leave the school and to go out to work with the poor and homeless in the slums of Calcutta. She took it to be the voice of God -- no doubt at all. Browning once wrote that "God has some whom He whispers in the ear." She was one. Mind you, she had no backers at that time, no money, no plan, no nothing; just the conviction that she was going to do what God wanted her to do. And, as always, she had "The power house of prayer" at her beck and call.

The people of India, largely Hindu, especially the priests and civil authorities, opposed and resented her European presence, at first. Those were still the days when Christian missionaries were trying to convert the people of India into a Western style of life, part of a way to make the Indians behave in the British Empire. The natives were suspicious, I guess.

It was difficult for her. But as she moved through Calcutta helping the homeless and the dying, holding them and speaking with them and eventually taking them to her little shelter, she slowly turned their hostility around. One city councilman said, "It is amazing, how much she cares!" One day a Hindu Priest fell ill with some infectious terminal disease. He was shunned by his own people. She took him to her shelter, comforted him, fed him, prayed with him. She never tried to convert him, just held and honored him. As he died, he said, "Thank you, Mother." She then took his body to the Hindu Temple so he could be properly buried in his own faith. With that, most official opposition was gone. Within a decade she was the Living Saint of Calcutta. Everyone adored her, almost.

There were social reformers all around the world

who complained that she coddled the poor and homeless, but she did nothing to combat the social system which encouraged poverty. She replied, "My job is to serve the poor; others can debate the subject." She once quipped, "People have complained that we spoil the poor with our love. Well, I think it is good to have at least once congregation spoil the poor. The others spoil the rich."

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In 1965 she opened up a home and school in Venezuela. In 1971 she opened her first United States lodging for the poor, in New York City. By the time of her death, her order, The Missionaries of Charity, had 600 homes, clinics, orphanages, and refugee centers for the poor and sick and dying, in more than 100 countries. They are staffed by 4,500 nuns, 500 brothers of the order, and thousands and thousands of volunteers. All because of one little woman.

Like all firm leaders, her life did not pass without controversy. They say she was too rigid in her requirements for the order. She apparently never read Dale Carnegie. No negotiator, she. She never learned to compromise. At times she was hopelessly unrealistic. For example, she opposed birth control, even in India with its teeming multitudes of homeless children. She opposed all kinds of contraception. She said it interfered with God's will. Even when the epidemic of HIV and AIDS was raging there and around the world, she was unrelenting in her opposition.

She condemned abortion, always. She also taught that men only should be priests and women should be content with their place in society. Some of her chief contributors had uneven reputations. But, her feeling was that if they helped the Missionaries of Charity, they were acceptable to her. What the Lord thought of them was up to Him. She could be unreasonable at times. But she loved the poor the homeless and the dying.

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There is a disturbing story about Mother Teresa, but it is one of my favorites. In time she became the favorite charity of many moneyed people all over the world. Maybe they were salving their consciences; but maybe they were also sending out their love of God through her to places they could never go themselves.

One day she inherited a large and lavish French country home. It was beautifully decorated. You and I should be so lucky. It was left to her to be a country retreat for the Missionaries of Charity so they could get away from the stress and strain of the city streets. It had beautiful walnut paneling, expensive wall coverings, fine art, antique chairs and tables and furnishings. But . . . she emptied the house, sold all the furnishings and gave the proceeds to the order. That was bad enough, but then she had workmen remove the walnut paneling from the library; she had the priceless hand-painted wall coverings torn from the walls; she stripped it all down to bare walls and floors, and . . . still she was not happy. It was too fine and fancy for the order and the poor. So, she sold the house and bought a warehouse, lest she and the sisters and their guests appear to be living in too much luxury.

That story bothers me because the rest of us spend time creating beautiful homes and collecting nice furnishings. We are proud of our dwelling places. We try to appreciate fine art and beauty. But, here was a woman who cared only for the Gospel. She practiced what she preached! She likened herself to her Savior, Jesus Christ, who never had a place to lay his head at night, who gave away everything He had, who reached out to the poor and the suffering, and who challenged the successful people of the town. "Success is not my goal," she wrote, "faithfulness is."

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There was a man in the Gospel, a rich man, who was looking for something he did not have: something to make him happy. He was fearful for his eternal life. He went to Jesus and said, "What

must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said, "Follow the Scriptures: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and might, and love your neighbor as yourself." That simple. (That was what Mother Teresa did.) But the man said to Jesus, "I have already done that." He probably had not, and Jesus knew it; he was "justifying himself," it says. Then -- hold your ears -- Jesus said to him, "Well, if you have followed all the Commandments there is one thing more. Sell everything you have and give it to the poor!" The Gospel reports that the man went away, sorrowfully. No wonder. Mother Teresa used to say that she had trouble looking into the face of Christ. Imagine. "Why?" her biographer asked her. She said, "Because He demands so much."

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I see her life in contrast to the life lived around us. I see a conflict between where the world is, and where she was. For example, she felt that no person should ever have to die alone, even if they were on the streets of Calcutta, even if they had leprosy or AIDS, or anything. She and her fellow missionaries ministered to the dying, gave them personal care. They carried them to their shelters, read to them, sang to them, made them feel loved and not alone.

She taught that the Gospel of Christ requires a total commitment. It is not a sometime thing, when it seems convenient. If you choose to follow Jesus then you must Follow Him. You must be totally committed, give up everything to become a disciple, put your faith in Christ first.

Now I know that sounds radical. I also know that not many of us will take it that seriously. Most will agree that we should do our best to help the poor. She said, "There is no Gospel or Good News of Christ unless you are reaching out yourself to touch the lives of those in need." The Bible says, "We who are strong ought to bear the burdens of the weak."

I know it sounds radical, even ridiculous, but be

careful as you ponder what the Bible says. In Matthew 25, Jesus assembled all the people on Judgement Day, a day each and all of us will have to face. His question was, "What did you do with your life?" Were you faithful to my Commands? They squirmed and stuttered, and carefully phrased their answers. The company of His followers, like a big old flock of sheep and goats, all came up together. The sheep being the good ones and the goats being the others. Jesus said He would separate them one from the other: sheep here — goats over there! So there!!

Then He said to some of the good, respectable, dignified Christians who called upon His name: "I am sorry. You cannot come in. Depart from me." "Why?"

"Because you never really loved me. You talked a good game but when it came to the crunch you were more concerned with yourself."

But to some others He said, "Come and enter into my kingdom." Humbled and surprised, they were astonished: "Why?" they said. He said, "Because when I was hungry and thirsty you fed me and gave me drink, when I was lonely you came to visit me." They replied, "B-b-but we never saw you, Lord. W-w-when did we ever see you, and when did we feed you, and when did we visit you, and care for you?" Jesus said, "When you did it to one of the least of these my brethren you did it unto me."

. . . Unto one of the least. . . .

That was Mother Teresa's theme song. That is how she found her happiness. Oddly, happiness is the final comment on our sermon. Most of us would say, if we were asked what we wanted most in life: "I'd like to be happy; I'd like to feel useful." So, if that is true, how do we find it? What makes God's children happiest of all? Let's have a little closing quiz, a completion test. I say, "Happy are the ones who" . . . and let each one listening complete the sentence. Happy are the ones . . . who have good health. Happy are the ones . . . who have friends or family to love them. Happy are those . . . who have something meaningful to do. Happy are those . . . who have enough money

to do what they want to do. We could go on all day.

But in the Bible, I leave it in your hands, there is another set of ways to say it. Jesus said, "Happy are they that mourn. Happy are the merciful. Happy are the pure in heart." Or, happy are those who find wisdom, or who listen to the Lord, or who trust in God's mercy. Or, in Proverbs 14: "Happy is the one who is kind to the poor."

And how can we do that? Well, many of you are already doing it. The benevolent activity of this and other Churches share the love of God with people who do not have it. All the charitable work and contributions we make to help those with illness or deformities or . . . all the things we do to minister to the lonely and dying in our families, among our friends, through our charities. Happy are the ones who do it.

It might sound radical and the streets of Calcutta seem so far away. Few of us will ever get there to help. But there are a myriad of other ways: like the problems of the Daily Bread Food Bank, who cannot keep up with the demand for food in Palm Beach County; or the programs to aid youth who are on drugs; or job retraining; or scholarships to help Christian children get a good education, and all the rest.

Many of us were overjoyed the other night at the dedication of the new Baxter Complex for non-profit corporations. The building was donated by the C. Kenneth and Laura Baxter Foundation. Mrs. Baxter is a member of our congregation, as was Mr. Baxter before his death. It will provide rent free space to the Boys and Girls Clubs, Alzheimer's Community Care, Youth For Christ, and a Christian music station, WAY.FM. It will help our whole community to guide and guard the young and old alike -- a prime example of reaching out to touch the lives of others.

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I'll close now. A little girl in Calcutta learned that

Mother Teresa had died. Her mother and she had both been recipients of the kindness of Missionaries of Charity. Mother Teresa had rescued the mother from the streets, from a life of near slavery. Then later she rescued the child from homelessness. The little girl said to her mother when she heard the news: "Oh dear, who will help us now?" . . . Oh dear, who will help us now? Oh dear, who will help us now, or evermore? Amen.

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