

**MERCY**  
Randall Tremba  
October 9, 2016  
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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**KINDNESS**

Before you know what kindness really is  
you must lose things,  
feel the future dissolve in a moment  
like salt in a weakened broth.  
What you held in your hand,  
what you counted and carefully saved,  
all this must go so you know  
how desolate the landscape can be  
between the regions of kindness.  
Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,  
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
You must speak to it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.  
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,  
only kindness that ties your shoes  
and sends you out into the day  
to mail letters and purchase bread,  
only kindness that raises its head  
from the crowd of the world to say:  
It is I you have been looking for,  
and then goes with you everywhere  
like a shadow or a friend.

**Naomi Shihab Nye**

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Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, saw gloom and doom on the horizon. And then it happened. The land was invaded, Jerusalem crushed and the people deported into exile, a long way from home.

There they sang a song of lament (Psalm 137). *By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion*, perhaps the way black mothers weep when they remember their sons, or the way refugees weep when they remember Syria, or they way many of us weep when we remember the joy we once had, or the way many of us weep when we remember the civility our nation once honored.

Jeremiah sent a letter to his compatriots in exile (Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7). *Thus says the God of Israel to all the exiles in Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens. Marry and have children. Thrive where you are and do not shrink away. Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*

Or, as we might put it, wherever you are: work for the common good.

There are many kinds of exile. Here's another in the gospel lesson for today (Luke 17:11-19).

*As Jesus entered a certain village, ten lepers—who lived in a kind of exile away from their homes and families—ten lepers approached him from a distance. “Jesus,” they cried out, “have mercy on us!”*

Four years ago this coming week on a beautiful October Thursday morning Paula and I drove our son Jonah up Interstate 68 to Morgantown where he entered federal prison to begin a 13-month sentence. It was an exile of sorts. Exiled from his family and friends. Exiled from home.

At his sentencing the month before we asked the judge for mercy—home confinement instead of prison, please. The judge did not grant mercy.

Jonah got out of the car and was escorted by a guard through the prison gate. Paula and I drove home with heavy hearts and an unspoken prayer under our breath. *Lord, have mercy.*

As it turns out, the mercy we prayed for and the mercy we pray for Sunday after Sunday through the *kyrie eleison* (Lord, have mercy) or when we say, *God, in your mercy hear our prayer*—the mercy we pray for is not so much the mercy of forgiveness a judge grants to a convict. Rather it is the mercy of compassion expressed in the relief of suffering—hence, “mercy” in the name of many hospitals.

It’s not that we are guilty and need forgiveness as much as it is that we are hurting and need compassion. Mercy is both forgiveness and compassion.

Over those dark and gloomy months, Paula and I received mercy from this community, from friends and strangers alike. Jonah found mercy as well. He was adopted into the “community of the exiled.” He made friends. He took classes. He joined the basketball league. In exile, we might say, he built a house and planted a garden.

Jeremiah sent a letter to the exiles. *Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat the produce.* Which is to say, do not wallow in sorrow. Live into hope.

Jonah befriended a grumpy and morose inmate named Rick who was a “leper” of sorts, shunned by the other inmates. Rick had been abandoned by his family, too. No visits. No letters.

When I shared Rick’s plight with you, many of you sent Rick cards and letters. We even raised money to provide him with his favorite newspaper, *The Wall Street Journal*. Rick was deeply touched by that act of kindness and told Jonah often.

Rick’s disposition brightened a bit. He didn’t exactly become cheerful or the toast of the prison, but he was no longer forsaken. He felt loved. As many of you know, Rick sent us a letter expressing his gratitude.

Even in exile community can be built. Mercy is everywhere.

There are many kinds of exile. Some are dramatic like prison or like refugees camps. But even there mercy abounds. It’s astounding how many people and organizations have rallied to bring mercy to godforsaken camps.

Some exiles are dramatic. Others are quiet and personal, like losing the one who meant the world to you. Or losing the world you had counted on. Or losing hope in the country you love.

Many of us feel exiled from the promise of our nation. By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered what could have been, the promise of racial harmony and gender equality.

But we mustn’t give up. We mustn’t shrink into despair. We mustn’t wallow in sorrow. We must live into hope.

*Seek the welfare of the place where I have sent you into exile, and pray on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your own.*

Adam and Eve, who stand for all humans, were expelled from the Garden and, as the Great Ancestors put it: they wandered East of Eden. Great sorrow lies in the regions East of Eden. But sorrow does not exclude hope. Grace, mercy and kindness can be found East of Eden.

As the poet Naomi Shahib Nye put it:

*Before you know what kindness really is you must lose things, feel the future dissolve in a moment like salt in a weakened broth. What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved, all this must go so you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of kindness.*

And so with or without words we pray: *Lord, have mercy.* And, then, somehow a miracle happens. Out of the blue kindness arrives like a shadow or a friend.

*Lord, have mercy, they cried out.*

We are the prayer. We are the poem. We are the song we now sing.

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**HYMN 749**

**“Come! Live in the Light**