

February 21, 2016



## **“Streams of Mercy: The Fullness of Mercy”**

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

*1 Peter 2:9-10*

*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

“Come, thou fount of every blessing....” Having heard this morning’s anthem sung so beautifully by our choir, I’d like to invite you to reach forward and pull out a United Methodist hymnal from the pew rack and turn to number 400.

“Come, thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace. Streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.”

Now look down to the fine print in the bottom left hand corner of the page—it tells us that these beautiful words were written by Robert Robinson in 1758.

Ok. Keep your hymnal out or put it away as you choose. But keep those words in mind: “Come, thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace. Streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.”

Part of the spiritual work we’re doing together during Lent this year is this work of tuning our hearts to hear and receive the loving mercy of our God, streams of mercy—for us, each of us, and through us for the whole world.

So who was the author of these words, Robert Robinson? And what can his story reveal to us about streams of mercy? Only a few things are reported about his childhood. It seems that his mother was from a wealthy family. But she fell in love with and married a man whom her father considered to be unworthy of her. A son was born, Robert, but when he was only 5, the father died. His maternal grandfather, having disapproved of the marriage, disinherited the boy.

In 18<sup>th</sup> century England, there was nothing of the safety net we know today. The boy was sent out as an apprentice and fell in with a rowdy lot. It is said that he got into all kinds of trouble before going one day to hear the great preacher of his time, George Whitefield, who influenced many, including our own John Wesley. Whitefield preached in the out-of-doors to whomever would come. And tens of thousands did and found their way, through his preaching, to the converting love and mercy of God. Robert Robinson was one of them. He was sponsored for studies and became a preacher himself and along the way wrote a few hymns, including “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” which comes out of his own personal experience of discovering that at the heart of our God is a great fountain of love and blessing for God’s people. Streams of mercy, pouring out, washing us clean, making us whole, setting us free to share those same mercies with everyone we meet. Tuning our hearts to receive this mercy is to know ourselves to be loved and changed through the converting power of the love and mercy of our God.

Maybe it’s important to note on this Second Sunday in Lent, as we dive deeper into the Streams of Mercy, that mercy is so much more than a feeling. Many of us might think of mercy as a feeling of pity or compassion, for someone less fortunate than ourselves, someone in trouble or suffering. “Oh, mercy, we might say under our breath, passing a homeless person on the street. If we’re from the South, we’d say “Lorda mercy,” or “Lordy, mercy.” But we might keep right on walking. So let’s be clear that when we’re talking about God’s mercy, it is, yes, first a feeling that God has in God’s heart, at the very core of God’s being Scripture tells us, but then it’s much more. God doesn’t stop at feeling sorry for us, or feeling bad for us. As we see through the life of Jesus, we know that God sees our need, feels compassion—and then acts to heal us and make us whole again. God does something to help us. In fact, God acts often to help us, over and over and over, as much as we need. Which is why we talk about mercy in the plural when it comes to God—streams of mercy, the tender mercies of God. As we sang last Sunday when we sang “Great is Thy Faithfulness,” we sang that refrain: “Great is thy faithfulness, great is thy faithfulness. Morning by morning, new mercies, I see. All I have needed Thy hand hath provided. Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.”

The writings in our Lenten devotional, the Scriptures and worship and sermons of this season are all designed to assist in this work of tuning our hearts to acknowledge and receive God’s streams of mercy, never ceasing, to know that we are loved and cherished by God, each and all of us. Lent is a season to listen and to restore a deeper relationship with God. This is the fullness of life that God wants for each of us. This is God’s gift to us. It emanates through our lives in two ways—as spiritual works of mercy and then as corporal works of mercy.

They are both actions we take in response to God's mercies for us. Spiritual works of mercy—we pray for others, we pray and tie Prayer Quilts for others, we forgive those who trespass against us, we encourage those who are questioning or doubting, we invite others into the life of faith, we give back for the upbuilding of the congregation, we nurture relationships, we hold one another in love. These are the spiritual works of mercy.

Pope Francis has written that wherever the church is present, wherever Christians gather, people should find “an oasis of mercy.” Isn't that beautiful? An oasis of mercy.

An oasis is a fertile or green area in a desert or wasteland, made so by the presence of water—a well or an underground spring. Church is an oasis of life, made vibrant by streams of mercy. There is an expression: “As you walk through the desert of life, may you always find your oasis — a place where you can find safety and sustenance.” I can't tell you how many times people have said to me—old-timers and newcomers alike—that this congregation is that for them, a place of safety, and real sustenance, where they find peace and welcome and love and real sustenance for the living of life. Thanks be to God.

This is as it should be. For God's mercy heals us and changes us. These are the words we hear this morning from first Peter: For “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

Having received God's mercy, we are now God's own people who proclaim the mighty acts of God through who we are, what we say, how we spend our time and our resources, how we treat others, how we “love our neighbor as ourselves.” These are called the corporal works of mercy, the social ministry of John Wesley. The works of mercy for him were feeding the poor, providing education for children, visiting in the prisons. We carry this on today. This is why we bring food every Sunday for the Westside Food Bank. It's why many of us will participate in Homerun For Kids for Upward Bound House in a couple weeks. It's why we provide Community Meals at Family Shelter and Family Place. It's why we use Fair Trade Coffee for Coffee Hour. It's why we'll participate in a Habitat for Humanity Build later this Spring.

And it's why we just sent a mission team to Haiti, who gave of their time, their money, their sweat, tears, laughter and faith to work alongside the Methodist Church in Haiti to build a health clinic in the remote village of Sobie. Wave your hands, team. Hats off to you and heartfelt thanks for your work of mercy. We look forward to hearing your Report Back next Sunday.

We have received mercy. We are God's own people and now, through us, that same mercy flows to others in a mighty stream of healing and compassion and justice. The problems of this world might seem insurmountable to us, but not to God. God's mercy is stronger still. God's mercy makes possible healing and reconciliation, justice and peace. Mercy enables change. Real change, that brings life out death and hope out of every situation of despair. Mercy brings smiles to the faces of children and food to the plates of the hungry. Mercy puts roofs over people's heads and brings a health clinic to their community. Mercy enables change when mercy becomes our witness to the power of God in this world, for this world, in the example of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

May these forty days of Lent refresh us as an oasis. May we be an oasis for all who come and for all whom we go out to meet. And may our God, whose name is mercy, grant us strength and peace. Amen.

Notes:

Pope Francis: [Misericordiae Vultus. Jubilee of Mercy: Merciful Like the Father.](#)

Pope Francis. [The Name of God is Mercy.](#) New York: Random House, 2016.