

“Giving and Getting”

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When I was in the third grade I learned how much more powerful mercy can be than vengeance.

It was a lazy summer afternoon. For some reason, I had laid down on my parent’s bed to take a nap with my little brother, Jim. My father was not a handyman, nor a woodworker, but he had recently refinished the entire bedroom set in the room, including the headboard of the bed on which we were napping. He was very proud of the work he had accomplished and I remembered how pleased my mother was when she saw her “almost like new” bedroom set for the first time.

I woke up from my nap before my brother. For sometime I just lay on the bed thinking about what I was going to do next. With nothing coming immediately to mind, I looked around, observing my surroundings. And that’s when I discovered a very tiny air bubble in the varnish on the headboard. I pushed the air bubble with my finger, and much to my amazement, it made a gentle pop. And when I took my finger away, I saw there was a crack in the varnish where the bubble had been. I also noticed

that I could grab the edge of the varnish with my fingertips and with very gentle encouragement, peel the varnish away from the wood, sometimes in long and fascinating ribbons. Gradually the tiny air bubble became a growing blob.

My activity must have disturbed my little brother's rest because in a few minutes he was awake, too. I showed him what I was doing and invited him to join me in making a beautiful design on mommy and daddy's bedroom set. We must have peeled varnish for the next ten minutes – giggling and squealing with each new ribbon that extended the blob like the arms of a starfish.

Our creative activity quickly came to an end when my mother came into the room. I'm sure that our giggling alerted her to the fact that something was going on in her bedroom that she needed to investigate. When she came into the room, she was greeted not only by two happy boys, but by ribbons and ribbons of varnish flung all over the covering of her bed.

“Look, Mommy,” my little brother squealed, “see what we've done.” And my mother saw, all right. And I knew immediately she wasn't pleased. She had the look on her face that I knew usually came

right before she gave me a spanking. But she didn't yell at us. And she didn't grab us. And she didn't hit us. She just stood there and I could see there were tears in her eyes. And she said something that I had never heard her say before in the eight years of my life. Usually she carried out her punishments quickly and decisively and misbehavior was dealt with efficiently. But this time she simply said, "Wait until your father gets home. You can show him what you've done."

The next few hours before my father's return from work seemed like an eternity. I knew I was in big trouble. I dreaded what my father was going to do and say. My older brother was no help or consolation. Every time he caught my eye he mouthed the words, "You're in trouble now," and he seemed to take great delight in my predicament. I was hoping I could get things over with the minute my dad walked into the house. But the first thing my mother said when he walked into the house was, "Go wash your hands and let's sit down for dinner. Then Tommy has something to show you and tell you."

I sat down at the table with my family, although I didn't take a bite of food. I listened carefully to see if my mother gave my father a hint of what I had done. But she kept the focus on my other siblings and what

they had done during the day. None of them gave anything away, although my brother kept taunting me. When dinner was over and the dishes had been cleared away, my mother finally said, “Tommy, you need to talk to your father now.” I could still hear a note of sadness in her voice.

I went to the end of the table where my father was sitting and I said, “Daddy, I hurt your bed.” “You hurt my bed? What were you doing – jumping on it? I’ve warned you about jumping on the bed!” “No, Dad, I wasn’t jumping on it. Jimmy and I peeled it.” “You peeled it?” he said. “What do you mean you peeled it?” “Go and look,” my mother said.

I followed my father and mother into the bedroom. The ribbons of varnish were still there on the bedspread. The mar in the finish created by my busy fingers seemed deep and ugly and repulsive. There were tears in my mother’s eyes again. And my father just stared in quiet disbelief at what his son had done to his destroy his hard work and loving labor. In the silence I heard his deep sigh and quiet whisper, “Jeepers creepers!” And then I started to cry. I hadn’t intended to cause my parents such suffering and pain. Something had gone terribly wrong and I was to blame – and I was ready to do anything, to accept whatever punishment was required to make

things right again. I was ready to go get the wooden paddle my mother and father used when giving us a spanking. If it would make them smile again, I was ready to let both of them spank me. I knew I was about to get the licking of my life, and I was eager to receive it, even more eager than my older brother.

My father finally spoke, first to my mother. “I worked so hard on that. I’m sorry, dear, I had hoped it might stay nice a little longer.” Then, he spoke to me. “I hope you’ll stop to think before you do anything like this again. You can see how much you’ve hurt your mother. And I’m very disappointed that you would damage something that doesn’t belong to you. I think you need to apologize to your mother and me, and then go to your room, and think about what you need to do so nothing like this ever happens again.

“I’m sorry, Daddy!” I blurted out, throwing myself into his arms. “I’m sorry, Mommy,” I sobbed through my tears and reached out for the assurance of her forgiveness. They both took me into my bedroom and helped their destructive, delinquent and guilt-ridden son into bed. We said our nighttime prayers as usual. They kissed me goodnight and tucked me in as usual. And I went to sleep that night

knowing I was forgiven – knowing I had been slain by mercy.

It's a funny thing. I think if my mother or father had spanked me that day, I wouldn't have remembered the events of that day. I would have focused more on their anger and their means of getting even – an eye for an eye – than I would have centered on the hurt I had caused them and the disarming mercy they extended to their wayward son. I would have thought that my debt had been paid and there wasn't anything else required of me. But instead I thought of the surprise and the goodness of mercy and how I had that gift to share with others who had committed some wrong against me, just as my parents had shared mercy with me. Every time I went into my parent's bedroom, there was that scar on their bed that challenged me to think before acting, and to be ready to give the gift of mercy to others, just as the gift had been given to me. My father never got around to refinishing that headboard again and it was a daily reminder of the goodness and wonder of mercy for me until I left home for college almost ten years later.

Giving and getting mercy is one of the persistent themes that run through the entire bible. Just stop and think of the stories about mercy being given and

shared, and the difference mercy made in the outcome of each story. From the Old Testament there is the story of Esau's mercy given to Jacob after Jacob's acts of trickery and theft. There's the story of Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers after they sold him into slavery in Egypt and reported to their father that Joseph was dead. From the New Testament, there is the story of Jesus' forgiveness of Peter after Peter's denial. There is the story of Paul's acceptance by the leaders of the early church after his years of persecuting and even participating in the deaths of men like Stephen. There are the parables about mercy that Jesus told, like the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. Over and over again, mercy is held up to the reader as the better and the more powerful alternative to vengeance and violent retribution. And I haven't even mentioned the most wonderful story of mercy of them all – God's gift of Jesus to the world and of the forgiveness that came to us through Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection from the grave.

In at least three places Jesus says that the mercy we hope to receive will be tied to the mercy we offer to others. First there is our parable for today where Jesus promises that the merciful will receive mercy. Then there is the petition in the Lord's Prayer where we ask God to forgive us our debts owed to God just

as we forgive others who are in debt to us. And there there is the parable of the man forgiven a debt of millions who throws a man owing him a debt of hundreds into prison. Jesus reminds his listeners that the mercy we extend to others will be the measure of the mercy that God extends to us when we stand before God on our day of judgment. Without a doubt, Jesus holds up mercy as more powerful than revenge.

I don't know how much you know about that word *mercy*. Its roots go back to the Hebrew word *chesedh*, a word for which a direct English translation is impossible. It means more than to sympathize with someone in trouble. It means more like having the ability to get right inside another person's skin until we can see with her eyes, until we can think with his mind, until we can feel with her feelings.

When I was in seminary and we were studying about the nature of God, we were taught that the most defining characteristic of God throughout the scriptures is *chesedh*. Our God is one whose basic nature is one of unlimited, loving kindness. And the ultimate act of God's mercy and love was his entry into our world in Jesus Christ. In Jesus, in the most literal sense, God got into our skin. God became a man. God thought our mind. God saw with our eyes.

God felt with our emotions. God got right into our very lives and understood us through and through, and extended to us unending love. God showed us what mercy is really all about.

Jesus promises that everyone who gives mercy will get mercy. And I believe it. And I try to share it. And I know I've experienced it. I experienced it as a boy when my parents climbed into my eight-year-old mind and responded to my guilt and anguish with compassion and understanding. And I've experienced mercy's stronger power with my own children, and with family, and with friends and enemies sometimes, too.

When it comes to mercy, we can give all we get. And we get all we give. And there's no reason to be stingy because God gives us mercy in unlimited supply.

O the incomparable joy of one who gets right inside other people until she can see with their eyes, think with their thoughts, feel with their feelings, for the one who can do that will find that others do the same for her, and will know that that is what God in Jesus Christ has done for us, one and all! Thanks be to God!

