

Three Unexpected gifts: Justice, Forgiveness and Mercy

Amos 5:24 “But let **justice** roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Matthew 18:21-22 Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I **forgive** him? As many as seven times?” 22 Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Micah 6:8 He has told you what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love **mercy**, and to walk humbly with your God?

Over the last 25-30 years, I’ve had the opportunity to think a lot about all three of the words emphasized in these selected verses - justice, forgiveness and mercy. I have learned that they are so much more than mere words. More than commandments, even. They are actions. They are choices. They are, more than anything, gifts from God and gifts we can give ourselves.

As most of you know, in 1988 Dad and I were victims of an assault by my estranged husband. In fact it happened this very week in 1988, on Sept 9th. Let me share that story with you and how I learned some important spiritual lessons.

I was 32 when I married David, a man who adored me, professed to love my God and whom I thought had the qualities I was looking for in a husband. We married in a Presbyterian Church in Texas. My favorite Bible chapter was read, 1 Cor 13. I was soon to learn the irony. “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

I was thrilled when I became pregnant within weeks of the wedding.

It did not take long for me to realize that the man I married had hidden a great deal from me about his true nature. His affection and attentions alternated with unfounded jealousy and insecurities. Although I was faithful and fully committed to him, he did not trust me, and he insisted on knowing every single detail of my comings and goings. We lived far out in the country, away from other houses. It was not long before the phone was being pulled out of the wall and thrown across the room when I talked to friends, the car keys hidden or the spark plugs taken from the car in an effort to keep me isolated. He would wake me in the middle of the night to interrogate me or accuse me of something, follow me from room to room harassing me, insist that the baby I was carrying was not his, tear up photos of me with any male - friends and relatives alike. He swore at me and called me terrible names; body blocked or restrained me if tried to leave the house when he railed at me. It made no sense. I could only think that he must be sick. I had married him "in sickness and in health" and so I wanted to help him. When in frustration I asked why he had never done any of this when we were dating, his chilling answer was "You never would have married me." Although he had never hit me, and promised he would never really hurt me, I feared his angry threats.

Soon I was exhausted & miserable and having stress-related pregnancy problems, so I did finally leave him after a particularly terrifying night when he woke me threatening suicide with a loaded gun. This was because I'd talked of a separation. I fled to my parents in Hawaii the next day. I was utterly confused. After a separation, intense counseling for him and many promises that he was changing, he joined me at my parent's home for a trial reconciliation. He had agreed to marriage counseling and other conditions. We saw a psychologist once or twice a week. We attended church regularly and talked to pastors & church friends, who thought we were a great couple. I was counseled to try harder, to pray harder, to not give up on my marriage. No one named the abuse or warned me that things would likely get progressively worse.

At first things were better, Josh was born and we fell in love with him. We named Joshua because David had dreamed that God had chosen that name for him. But soon, the same erratic behaviors returned, and became much worse. He was threatened by my close family, who stood by me and intervened when he disrespected me. If I talked of separating again, he

would tell me that if I left him, he would hurt my family. Although he adored my father, who treated him like a son, he resented the fact that he could not dominate me while we lived in the same home.

Over and over, I would pray for insight. I wanted to be a good wife, but I couldn't live like a hostage. I was becoming depressed. In my head I would sing a song over and over. It would bring me peace. While he was yelling at me, or driving recklessly with us in the car, I would calm myself by silently singing, "You are my hiding place. You always fill my heart with songs of deliverance. Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in you. I will trust in you. Let the weak say 'I am strong in the strength of the Lord.'" It became my daily mantra.

But my marriage continued to unravel. One night David came home, grabbed me out of my sleep and woke me up, holding a knife to me. It went on for hours, as he interrogated me and threatened to hurt my father if I made noise and woke him. The next morning, when he realized that I had hidden the knife after he fell asleep, he looked me in the eye and coldly stated, "I should have killed you last night when I had the chance."

I felt trapped. I was afraid if I left him, he might hurt my family. But I also knew my God didn't expect or want me to live like that and raise my baby in such destructive chaos. My dreams were shattered.

The next day I saw a Christian attorney from our church. I told him everything and said I was terrified for my family and myself. When I asked if I should get a restraining order, he said "No. We can get one later if you need one. There are laws against assault."

After two weeks, David reluctantly moved out. At first, he was on his best behavior, trying to win me back. But five days after he moved out, everything changed.

Knowing how much you all love and admire Dad, and Mom, too I know this will be hard for you to hear. But God had a plan and has worked in miraculous ways through our experience.

Thankfully, Mom was out of town visiting Jan. Dad and I had joined some church friends for a dinner picnic on their sailboat. I arrived home that night about 45 minutes before Dad returned. As Josh slept peacefully in his car seat, I opened that door that I mentioned earlier and was ambushed by my estranged husband. He held a knife against my face and threatened to kill me if I didn't stop screaming. He threw me up against the wall and began to savagely beat me over and over. He then held me hostage, with the knife cutting into my throat, so I couldn't speak or scream. As blood poured from my face he told me that he was there to kill my father, that he intended to "cut his eyes out". I was horrified. He said he had already cut the phone lines. Try as I might, I could think of no way to stop the horror which was unfolding. I was paralyzed with fear. I couldn't believe it was happening. I pleaded with him to leave us alone and spare Dad, but he stuck the knife deeper into my neck.

When Dad arrived, David released me and raced to the door. Dad was viscously attacked. From the attempt to slash his eyes, he sustained a wound through his eyebrows that later required more than 40 stitches to repair. Miraculously, his eyes were untouched, although we didn't know it until later. I had screamed a warning, chased David and attempted to restrain him as he lunged at Dad, and in turn I was stabbed deeply in the stomach. The knife cut my intestines. I nearly lost an eye as well, when he tried to wrench it from its socket as I attempted to subdue him.

Dad had always been my hero but probably saved my life that night. He somehow finally subdued David in that darkened hallway. Time stood still. I was paralyzed by fear. Then I heard a voice clearly say "Turn on the light. When he sees what he's done, he'll run away." I did that, and David ran.

John 3:20-21 “Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.” Evil cannot abide the light and God showed us that in a very real way that night.

David was arrested later that night. He was later charged with attempted murder among other things. He eventually pled to attempted manslaughter instead and was given a 20-year maximum sentence.

In the aftermath, our stunned church stood solidly with us. As I struggled to understand, to forgive and to find God’s will for my future, the same Christian lawyer instructed me to take the baby to the prison, saying “a bad father is better than no father at all.” Fortunately, other Christian friends advised otherwise, and I was able to see that I could not help my husband, although I secretly sent others to help him. I had to care for my baby and stay away from him to keep us both safe. In the aftermath of that horror, we had to work to heal physically and emotionally. Moving forward as Christians, we grappled with how to adapt to the spiritual challenges that such an experience presented.

At first I received apology letters from prison. I felt great pity for David, but I realized that this was his way of trying to manipulate us and make us feel guilty. He did not accept responsibility and was angry that we had cooperated with the prosecution. I received information about death threats from prison, and David even sent the restraining order he was served to me, as if to say “You think a piece of paper can keep me away?” When I read the words of Psalm 55, it spoke directly to me. “The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart: his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords.”

My heart was broken, but I tried to stay strong for my son. Over time, our wounds healed. God remained faithful and blessed my family abundantly. I left my work in special education, went back to college, got a degree in Human Services with a special emphasis on DV, wrote a grant to the state legislature and started a community based hospital crisis team for battered women, so others would not have to endure what I had after my assault. I worked on passing many laws and organizing survivors as activists. JUSTICE was now the focus of my life. So many others needed JUSTICE, and I devoted my life to working with victims and fighting for it for them. I

came to love the verse in Amos, 5:24 “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” What an image!

I became stronger and moved on, but forgiveness and mercy were still not things I was focusing on. I occasionally thought of the scripture commanding us “forgive 70 x7” and I felt very guilty about not visiting David in prison, although I was terrified of him and I knew it would be foolish to do so.

Often people, especially religious people, wanted to push me and other abuse survivors to forgive our abusers. I knew they meant well, but I felt that people who had not experienced what I had been through had no right to give me advice or judge me about this. I came to resent the very word “forgive”. One minister visited David, felt very sorry for him, and continually brought me letters from the prison. This was not only upsetting, it was in direct violation of the permanent restraining order. I felt betrayed.

I received many subtle and not-so-subtle messages that I needed to forgive David but I ignored them. My fear of him and pity for him were almost overwhelming.

Forgiveness is a process not an event, and a pastor I met taught me as much. It was not about saying that what he had done was okay, she said. It was a very personal journey- a matter of the heart and also the head- mostly for me, not my offender. It was a decision I had to make, if I was ready, when I was ready. It was about setting myself free. I had never heard it explained that way. That made sense to me. I was relieved. I began to realize that forgiveness was not really about David at all - it was about me. He had had control of me the whole time we were together. I decided I was not willing to let him control me anymore. I knew if I held onto resentment, he would still be there with me, in my head, everyday, still calling the shots.

Around that time I read a quote from writer Malachy McCourt – “holding on to resentment is like taking poison and waiting for someone else to die”. That was profound. I also read in Bishop Desmond Tutu’s book about South Africa’s “Truth and Reconciliation Process” a story about 3 U.S. ex-servicemen who were standing in front of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. One asks another, “Have you forgiven those who held

you prisoner of war?” “I will never forgive them,” says the other. His friend replies: “Well, then it seems they still have you in prison, don’t they?”

For my own sake, my sanity, my spiritual well-being -In order to have peace, I knew I had to choose to let him go. It was a choice – a gift I could give myself. No wonder we are commanded to forgive, I realized! It is how we heal ourselves! That made sense to me! And it worked, I was set free.

I had now learned two valuable spiritual life lessons - the power of JUSTICE and the power of FORGIVENESS. I realized that I never would have learned them had I not experienced domestic violence and attempted murder.

But what about MERCY? I never gave it much thought, really. I had often heard Dad say that “Justice is when someone gets what they deserve. Mercy is when they get what they don’t deserve. And Grace is when they get what they could never deserve.” I loved that distinction.

I of course assumed there would never be a chance for me to extend mercy to David- no reconciliation, no opportunity to have a discussion and forgive him face to face, and for this I was secretly relieved.

But God is full of surprises.

My fear was overwhelming at times. David apparently never stopped looking for me and his father told me at one point that he thought David was plotting to have me killed. He hated me for helping to imprison him. I learned street fighting, full-force self-defense in case he came back to finish me off, as he did in my nightmares.

Then seven years after his incarceration I learned suddenly that he was about to be released early. A few days later, he located my unlisted phone number and address somehow and called me to say that he knew where I lived. I immediately quit my job and went into hiding with Josh. I worked with the authorities to keep him behind bars and then testified at the legislature about how his sentence was botched. When he was released, he was put on a plane and sent back to Texas to serve his parole. He was banned from returning to Hawaii. But I still did not feel safe.

For years David apparently never quit looking for us, and although he was released for a time, he was eventually re-incarcerated. I cooperated in that

case, and was told that while he was out of prison, he had purchased a gun and was plotting to kill me. Behind the scenes, I cooperated with the DA and he was given a life sentence.

Despite the on-going trauma, my family thrived and our faith made us stronger. At my father's church, we began domestic violence education efforts and ministries that included a free transitional shelter for battered women and their children which I managed for several years. Many years went by. We were privileged to assist with a number of other faith-based domestic violence efforts as well, and to minister to many hurting families. I no longer had nightmares and David was a distant memory.

Then about 3 years ago, out of the blue, I learned that David was dying in a prison hospice unit. He had advanced stage lung cancer. I had no idea if he still wanted to kill me, but the more I thought about it, the more convinced I was that I needed to offer to take Josh to meet his father before he died if he needed and wanted that. Josh has not seen him or had any contact with him since he was 8 months old. Josh finally told me he wanted to meet his father and I promised to try to make that possible. My family was not convinced it was a good idea at all, but I had that deep promised "peace that passes understanding" about and my spirit just KNEW somehow that it was what we were supposed to do and it would good for all three of us. I sent a letter to David and hoped he would see us. I tried to get the prison Chaplain to help me but he did not return my calls. So I rented a car and Josh and I made the long trip to Texas.

What resulted was nothing less than a true miracle. I had no fear and complete peace. Josh wanted to meet his father and was looking forward to it. My great desire was that David would acknowledge what he had done, tell Josh he loved him and talk to him, father to son. I cautioned him that he might be disappointed or even rejected, but God gave me signs all along the way that His hand was on us and we were on the right path. As we crossed the state line into Texas, I said, well, we're getting close. I turned on the radio and instantly it was Kenny Rogers singing these exact words:

"Promise me, son, not to do the things I've done
Walk away from trouble if you can
It won't mean you're weak if you turn the other cheek
I hope you're old enough to understand
Son, you don't have to fight to be a man"

I laughed out loud. This was God's way of telling me that David would be in the right frame of mind and that he would say these things to Josh.

And that's exactly what happened. He was warm and welcoming and my fear was gone. I saw the peace of God on his face. He had changed! He admitted what he had done to us and he asked our forgiveness, He told Josh, "Listen to your mother and your grandparents. Don't be like me." We talked and even laughed. We spent two afternoons with him. He gave us cross necklaces that he had made out of materials in the prison. We talked about Jesus and how people had ministered to him in prison. Several ministers came by and we talked and sang. We took a photo of David and Josh together. We had a group hug. David cried and was so proud, showing off his son to all the nursing staff. The love of God was in the room and I could not have scripted it better. After two days we left.

We never saw David again. He died 3 months later, but in the meantime, we exchanged letters and cards and artwork. I supported his release to a nursing home so he could die a free man. At Christmas we sent him slippers.

By extending mercy, I had received yet another amazing lesson and gift from God that I would have missed had I not experienced the awful abuse and violence in my marriage.

Just a year later, God brought Ron back into my life, and well, you know the rest of the story.

Today, I can actually thank God for what has happened in my life, although I would not want to re-live it. I know that it was only through these dramatic experiences that I have been brought to the place where God wanted me to be. Sometimes the most painful thing in life can be the greatest springboards to finding our purpose, our personal power and our Christian calling. God can turn our mourning into dancing and give us beauty for ashes.

As I said earlier, my favorite Bible chapter has always been 1 Corinthians 13. It ends with this verse "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." But today I have 3 additional favorite words. These three remain, too: Justice, forgiveness and mercy.