

45 Mercy Street

Good Morning. I am so thankful for the opportunity to speak to you today ... on this mother's day weekend. Happy Mother's Day!

Needing Mercy:

Our Gospel reading today is the Parable of the Good Samaritan. I have chosen this passage because I wanted to talk about the great need we all have for mercy - including mothers.

Recently, I came across a poem called *45 Mercy Street*. It is a poem written by a woman, a mother, named Anne Sexton, who struggled most of her life with depression and emotional anxiety. She passed away in the early 1980's. Today she is generally considered to be one of the best confessional poets of the century.

45 Mercy Street is a poem about a woman searching for a home marked by mercy ... a home that she knew as a child ... but a home which, as her life became marked by struggle, disappeared. The poem is too long to read in its entirety but parts of it follow here:

In my dream,
drilling into the marrow
of my entire bone,
my real dream,
I'm walking up and down Beacon Hill
searching for a street sign --
namely MERCY STREET.
Not there.

I try the Back Bay.
Not there.
Not there.
And yet I know the number.
45 Mercy Street.

I know the stained-glass window
of the foyer,
the three flights of the house
with its parquet floors.
I know the furniture and
mother, grandmother, great-grandmother,
... I know it well.
Not there.

Where did you go?
45 Mercy Street,

I walk in a yellow dress
and a white pocketbook stuffed with cigarettes,
enough pills, my wallet, my keys,
and being twenty-eight, or is it forty-five?
I walk. I walk.

... Not there.

The full poem explores the haunting emptiness and despair of life when there is no mercy to be found. I wanted to talk about this today because I believe that too many people in the world, including those in our families and in our churches, are looking for but not finding kindness or mercy. This breaks my heart. After 30 years in partnership in ministry with Geoff, I am more passionate about this than anything else. The absence of mercy and kindness breaks my heart; but, more importantly, I believe it breaks the heart of God.

A musician named Peter Gabriel used this poem in the 1980's to compose a song called Mercy Street. The refrain played over and over: "mercy, mercy, looking for mercy... mercy, mercy, looking for mercy."

The truth is that 45 Mercy Street is a very important address ... it's a safe place ... a sanctuary where people find mercy and ... the now famous phrase taught to us by the Zahl's ... one-way-love.

Receiving Mercy

In our Scripture reading this morning, someone finds 45 Mercy Street. Of course it does not start out that way. At first someone is hurt badly, beaten up, left bleeding and alone. He is not in a safe place. People walk by without hearing him, they don't see him, they don't go to him, they don't care about him.

If I want to understand the great gift of mercy, the most helpful way for me to read the Parable of the Good Samaritan is to insert myself into the narrative as the broken, beaten, bleeding man on the side of the road. I am ashamed to admit that for many years I read this parable in the role of the Good Samaritan and all I heard out of this passage was "go be more merciful."

But in the role of the man broken and bleeding, I learn much more about mercy. As that man, I am in desperate need of help. I will die without someone showing me mercy.

Only as I imagine myself in that yellow dress (sick, lonely and in despair) frantically searching the Back Bay of Boston for 45 Mercy Street will I understand the amazing gift mercy is when and if you can find it.

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan someone hears me, sees me broken and bleeding. He comes to me and cares for me. *I don't die but live.* To me, this is the Gospel with legs.

This week, I was that broken person on the side of the road. It's very normal ... many of us, and I would say especially mothers, find ourselves a bit broken on the side of the road. We don't like to talk about that and certainly that is not the hallmark version of motherhood - but it is often very true.

My second son left for Afghanistan several days ago and I was frightened and tearful ... on the same day, I found out that one of my dearest friends will probably be leaving town and I was very sad. I was trying hard but I was bleeding on the side of the road.

And do you know what happened? The Lord heard my distress and had mercy on me. How did He do that? How did He see me, come to me and care for me?

One of my friends invited me up for a glass of wine on her warm back porch - a safe place. Another one sent me a timely and loving letter. Yet another friend sent a card, which reads "*verse & prayer for Matthew inserted here.*" Finally, another dear one - in the midst of her own overwhelming personal disappointment and anguish - walked quietly over to me, put her arm around me, and stood and cried with me ... just for a minute. That's all it took.

That's how mercy works. Mercy can be as simple and as great as that. I found *45 Mercy Street*. Oswald Chambers says that God's Mercy dispels our darkness.

What does this have to do with Mother's Day? Geoff said to me last night that it sounded to him as though I believed that mercy was the heart of motherhood. And ... I do believe that ... mercy is the heart of motherhood.

The Good Enough Mother

There are certainly many human expectations for mothers today that are simply that ... human expectations, not necessarily what God asks of mothers.

Today, we are all a bunch of "uber-moms." Do you know what an "uber-mom" is? Anna Quindlen defines "uber moms" as mothers who "*bounce from soccer field to school fair to play date until they fall into bed at the end of the day, exhausted, their lives somewhere between the Stations of the Cross and a decathlon.*" These mothers have redefined mothering as scheduling.

In an age of hyper-parenting and uber-moms, I love Anna Quindlen's Newsweek column entitled "The Good Enough Mother." She writes: "*There was a kind of carelessness to my childhood. I wandered away from time to time, rode my bike too far from home, took the trolley to no where in particular and back again. If you had asked my mother at any given time where I was, she would likely have*

paused from spooning Gerber peas into a baby's mouth or ironing our school uniforms and replied, "She's around here somewhere."

"By the new standards of mothering, my mother was a bust. Given the number of times I got lost when I was young, she might even be termed neglectful. There's only one problem with that conclusion. It's dead wrong. My mother was great at what she did. Don't misunderstand: she didn't sit on the floor and help us build with our Erector sets, didn't haul us from skating rink to piano lessons. She couldn't even drive. But where she was always felt like a safe place."

That's the key phrase ... *"Where she was always felt like a safe place."*

If where she was felt like a safe place then you can be sure that kindness, mercy and one way love were all present. Where she was, was 45 Mercy Street. Where she was, was the Inn on the Samaritan Road. This good enough mother ... what used to be called "an ordinary devoted mother" ... is all that God has asked of us.

To be a good enough mother you do not need to edit your child's perfectly good college entrance essay to make sure he gets into the school of *your* choice (like I did). To be a good enough mother does not mean redoing your sixth grader's art project so that it looks like some local design team produced it (like I did). Good enough mothers do not sit on the sidelines of every game their children ever play pretending they are NFL stars-to-be ... when we would really rather be reading. Motherhood is not martyrdom.

The truth is that the attachment-parenting gurus have made us all crazy. In the old days, when I read all those mothering books, I desperately wanted to be a capable, intelligent and perfect mother. Now, I would actually be pleased to be called an "old-fashioned, devoted, good enough mother" - someone who has simply provided a safe place of mercy for those I love.

But, you say, "I am not so sure I can provide a place of safety and mercy." And I would say to you ... of course you can't ... alone. And, you might say, "I'm not so sure my house could be considered 45 Mercy Street or The Inn on the Samaritan Road." And I would say to you, of course it won't be ... alone.

But as you experience the mercy of Jesus (as I experienced the mercy of Jesus through my friends this week) through those He sends to hear *you*, to see *you*, and to care for *you*; you will find that the mercy given to *you* will pass right through your heart to others.

So I leave you this morning with a question: How wonderful would it be to re-write the addresses of our homes, our churches, and our Christian institutions to read 45 Mercy Street or The Inn on the Samaritan Road?

Please pray with me ...