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Fifth Sunday of Lent

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Mercy

The Pharisees who brought the person caught in adultery to Jesus, wanting to trap him between the law and mercy. They thought that if he came down on one side or the other he would be in trouble. They could say: "Gotcha!" Interestingly the word *Pharisee* means "to divide." The Pharisees were experts of the law who placed heavy burdens on the people and divided the world into strict observants and those not worthy of God's mercy because they were not strict observants. Their world was black and white, worthy and unworthy. Jesus did not fit into their world either.

But Jesus speaks a truth to them that they cannot oppose: "Let the one among you who has no sin cast the first stone." We all fail, we are all guilty of sin, and we are all at God's mercy. The gentleness of God was revealed in the stories of The Good Merciful Samaritan, the Prodigal Son and the merciful father. Here again we see it in this sordid tale of the men who wanted to stone a woman. Luke gives us again and again a picture of the mercy of God embodied in Jesus, who we commit ourselves to follow.

The reality is NO one deserves mercy. For an example: A woman, whose son was brought before Napoleon for deserting Napoleon's army, was judged as deserving death. The deserter's mother begged Napoleon to have mercy on him. Napoleon said the man did not deserve mercy. The mother responded: "It would not be mercy if it was deserved." This world seeks justice yes, but not mercy. Mercy is a gift. It cancels out wrongs and transgressions. It is not earned; it doesn't require a defense attorney and it's not a how much right and how much wrong.

Mercy is given to each of us. It is God's utter graciousness. Mercy is one of the 99 names given by Islam for God. Some of us from this community went to the Interfaith Services at the mosque on Park Street a few weeks ago. Each religious group was invited to express something of its faith. A Sikh dressed in a suit and tie with a red turban on his head, got up and said that before he speaks of his faith, he wanted to tell of a recent experience he had. Shopping in Kmart recently, he encountered two little girls. One said: "You look like a magician."

The other said: "I think you look like God." It caused him to smile; he thanked them, and then moved to the check out then to his car. As he walked through the parking lot a car whizzed by with people screaming obscenities and yelling "Isis" at him. He had no opportunity for dialogue. When we categorize, we separate, just like the Pharisees. There is no circumstance considered, no consideration of the particular. A red flag should go up for each of us when we start a sentence with the word all: "All Moslems, all Jews, all Republicans, all Democrats..." Where is the Oneness, where is the mercy? Mercy is seeing that if I cut off even one person I am dividing my own heart.

Stones carried by the Pharisees were dropped and little by little they slithered away. We have an opportunity to drop the stones in our heads and hearts, to shake them out. The judgments, the prejudice, the hate, the revenge, the envy, the callousness, the grudges, the little niggling things we let annoy us: shake them out, drop those stones.

Jesus did not condemn the women but let her go on to a new life. Isaiah reminds us that God is creating something new and asks us to be aware of it. Let go of the past, God says. Spring forth to what is happening now.

Living on a tall hill next to Green Lakes State Park gives us an opportunity to see all of that happening on the surface. The trees which look dead are starting to bud, the dirty snow is gone, the greening of the earth is beginning and God is honored by the tweets and honks of returning birds. These things remind us of the opportunity for an internal spring.

Paul says to his friends in Philippi: I give no thought to what lies behind but push on to what is ahead. My entire attention is on the finish line as I run toward the prize to which God calls me –life on high in Christ Jesus."

It's a new time of year, a new week. If we have messed up, we get another chance, and another chance....an infinite number of chances. God's love is always there, unrelenting. We get to start over, forget the past, and grasp the newness offered to each of us. God is like that mother before Napoleon, wanting for us to experience mercy. God invites us to a new spring in our lives.