

God's Mercy at Work: A Comedy in Three Episodes
A sermon by Laurence Steven
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Good morning! Welcome to daylight savings time! Are you enjoying the ride on our weather rollercoaster? It seems to be up into the teens with the sun shining one day, and then down below freezing with rain and snow showers the next. Jan and I were hiking in tee-shirts in Niagara Glen on Friday, but yesterday we just hunkered down. Yet, all in all, this winter hasn't been too bad around here, has it? Even today's blustery spring gusts seem to carry a promise of better to come. You heard me right: *spring* gusts. Spring is 9 days away! Because 2024 is a leap year the spring equinox is a bit earlier, March 19th. But who cares about technicalities? We're just over halfway through Lent, and the snowdrops and crocuses are up! They must know something! And we do too. Easter is just around the corner! We're going to make it! Thanks be to God, whose grace and mercy abound and surround.

But hold on Laur, you might be thinking. Easter is coming, yes, but so is Good Friday. You're getting ahead of yourself. And you'd be right. The giddy heights of reconciliation are often closely linked with the depths of despair, aren't they? The green pastures lie very close to the valley of the shadow. Our preaching team chose to use the *Leader* magazine theme of "Christ Among Us" for Lent, but to adapt it by adding the opening phrase: "World of Tension." Doing so acknowledges, as Pastor Darrell's paragraph on the theme in the bulletin says, "that our world is living in a wilderness, burdened by wars and rumours of wars." And yet, Christ *is* among us; God's mercy *enfolds* us.

The *Leader* Lenten series titles this Sunday, Lent 4, as "Christ Among Us, the Way of Mercy." And in turn I've titled my sermon "God's Mercy at Work: A Comedy in Three Episodes."

Now comedy, as I'm using the term, is not so much humour as it is an action in which estrangement or separation is overcome by reconciliation. Most of Shakespeare's comedies end with marriages, where the star-crossed, unlucky lovers finally overcome the impediments to their joyous union (often just in the nick of time). When they can't overcome those impediments—whether family quarrels or crafty villains or political divides (and these are usually intertwined)—the lovers, such as Romeo and Juliet, remain star-crossed, and the play becomes a

tragedy. And in a more overtly Christian manner, remember what the medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri called his three-part poem about Hell (Inferno), Purgatory (Purgatorio), and Heaven (Paradiso): *The Divine Comedy (Divina Commedia)*.

So, it's in the spirit of comedy as reconciliation that I want to share with you three personal episodes I experienced in the last two months, and which have helped me more fully sense and experience God's mercy in my life—Christ among us. And there may well be some humour too.

Episode 1—The Christ candle challenge. On Jan. 28th Jan was supposed to lead worship, but had felt fluish the Saturday before and was still ill, so I stepped in. Well! I felt a bit odd that morning in front of you, but put it down to being out of place reading Jan's notes. And then came the time to light the Christ candle, a highly symbolic and significant moment in our Sunday morning gathering, as we transition more intentionally into worship. Well! I blew it! If you remember, I fumbled around looking for the lighter, which I couldn't find. In fact I wasn't supposed to use the lighter, but instead use the small already-lit candle to light a taper which I would use in turn to light the Christ candle—an easy-peasy procedure I completely forgot how to do. Instead I picked up the Christ candle, intending (I think) to bring it down to the small candle's flame, but before I could the glass base fell off the candle and clattered onto the communion table. At this point I needed to be saved from myself, and a guardian angel, Annie, rescued me, lighting the taper candle and giving it to me to light the Christ candle, which I somehow managed to do.

I felt mortified, embarrassed, and befuddled. All I could do was laughingly apologize. At home later things actually got a bit worse as fever and chills took over. I went to bed. The next day Jan and I both tested positive for covid.

In retrospect I expect God was grinning a bit at this bumbling mortal. And that grin shone a light of loving grace and mercy onto me for which I am profoundly grateful. I'm especially grateful when I remember what happened to poor Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6: 6-7. You know the story: Uzzah was honoured by being chosen to accompany the ark of the covenant from his father Abinadab's home to Jerusalem, following King David. “⁶ When they came to the threshing floor of Nakon, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen stumbled.⁷ The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down, and he died there beside the ark of God.”

And yet, Uzzah's act was *not* irreverent. It was a prime example of reverence. Here's the definition: "a feeling or attitude of deep respect, love, and awe, as for something sacred; veneration. 2. a manifestation of this; specif., a bow, curtsy, or similar gesture of respect" (*Collins Dictionary*). And that is exactly what Uzzah did; a gesture of respect to the tipping ark of God. I don't know why Uzzah died. Perhaps he had a sudden heart attack due to the tension he was under accompanying the so-holy ark. Who knows? But after my illness-induced Christ candle episode I'm fairly certain that God didn't do it. No. It seems to me that we bumbling humans, rather than extend sympathy, mercy, and grace to poor Uzzah whose frail human mortality had caught him at a horribly inopportune time, had to find a meaning for Uzzah's untimely death, and so blamed his irreverence and credited God with punishing him.

Pastor Darrell preached last week about the Value of Taking a Second Look. He said the opportunity to do so often comes after a disruption to our usual understanding of the world around us. Yes. One of our common, traditional, age-old understandings of the world, which is very hard to shake off, is that because some folks have more than others they are better than others, and that they therefore deserve more, and that God (or nature, or the economy, or whatever) rewards them more. In this understanding, the ones who have less deserve less. God (or nature, or the economy, or whatever) is somehow punishing them, or at least keeping them in their place.

But that story, that world, is regularly disrupted, interrupted, derailed by the story throughout the Bible of God's abounding grace and mercy breaking in and transforming who we are, changing us, converting us, giving us the opportunity for a second look at what we see as our world. Jesus' incarnation is the most dramatic incursion of the kingdom of God's mercy into our usual story of what Paul in our Ephesian's reading today calls the "course of this world" where we follow the "ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient." A few weeks ago on Lent 1 the Grace Players—Anita, Mac, and Kevin—presented Jesus's temptation in the wilderness. And there, in Satan's offers to Jesus we see the ruler of the power of the air inviting us, cajoling us, taunting us, tempting us to accept a story of riches and privilege and power, a story which Jesus rejects, forcefully, which he calls disobedience.

Episode 2—Gas station brain fog. On Feb. 11th, two weeks after the Christ candle fiasco, I left coffeetime at the church and headed to the PetroCan to gas up

so Jan wouldn't run out on her way to a pastoral visit the next day. Jan had decided to walk home. I gassed up the van, hung up the pump, and reached for my wallet...which wasn't there. What?! Oh no! And then I remembered that I'd asked Jan to put it in her purse because I had too much stuff in my pocket. And now all of a sudden I was thrown out of "the course of this world" and into a world where I very much needed the mercy of the attendant. And as I sidled sheepishly into the kiosk, muttering something about forgetting my wallet and wondering aloud what happened next, I in turn threw the poor 20-something, ponytailed, probably part-time, probably minimum wage or less, male attendant out of "the course of this world" and into one where his mercy had a defining role to play. In fact we were both experiencing how God's world enfolds and deepens the one we operate in as a matter of course without a second look. Whether or not we were fully aware of it at the time, we were both in God's realm where our deeper selves are connected through the need for mercy and God's provision of it through us.

What happened seemed simple enough. I told him where I lived and asked to go home and return in 5 minutes with my wallet. (And no, I didn't say "pretty please".) He thought it over, mentioning the need to call the police if I decided not to return, checked to see that he had my license plate number caught on his video screen, and then, with a somewhat reluctant look it seemed to me, agreed to let me go home to get my wallet. The way of the world meets the way of mercy.

I returned promptly and paid, dropped a ten dollar bill on the counter for him in thanks, and turned to go. He protested that I didn't need to do that. As I was going out the door I turned back and said, "I know I didn't. Neither did you." He said, "thank you so much!"

Episode 3—Christ at the intersection. On Feb. 17th my son Tom and I were returning home from the Fairview Mall. At the intersection exiting the Mall onto Geneva St. I slowed to hand a gift of a snack, juice box, and loose change to the so-familiar-to-all-of-us homeless beggar who frequents that spot or so many others like it. The zombie-like gentleman with long stringy hair and open sores on his face, who was probably in his twenties but who looked significantly older, took my offering and said, "God bless you!" My action led to a discussion between my son and me about why Jan and I do that. My Sunday School-raised son who is now unchurched said the prevailing social view that he was hearing increasingly was that giving the beggars something simply encouraged them. That by not giving them anything we could apply some pressure to them to go to shelters, to use the

available facilities. My response was that despite the best intentions of governments, social service agencies, law enforcement, and individuals, etc. these people are falling through the cracks in the “course of this world.” And a quick shout-out to St. Catharines Mayor Mat Siscoe for pushing hard to establish much-needed homeless shelters in the city. Yet, even with this, my point remains: Addiction leads to mental illness, or mental illness leads to addiction; low wages and part-time work and high housing costs and high interest rates lead to homelessness. Blaming the victims is an inappropriate response. They are still there, and their numbers are growing. They beg for mercy at our intersections, and often bless us when we—in our confusion, bewilderment, and sense of complicity—give them a coin.

What the beggar at the intersection shows us, increasingly and ironically, is both our own need to be merciful, and in our limitations, our own need for mercy. How else, and why else, does God’s kingdom come to earth? Jesus came, and in his unfathomable mercy—both in his ministry and in his giving of his own life for us—he gave us the pattern. His familiar words in Matthew 25: 34-40 go to the heart of God’s kingdom on this earth, the green pasture in the midst of the shadowed valley, the reconciliation in the despair, and I’ll close with those words:

³⁴ “Then the King will say . . . , ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

⁴⁰ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

Amen