

Please echo this prayer -

O God who made the heart and ear,  
we listen care'fly as you draw near  
to hear your word in many ways  
and live your life throughout our days. Amen.

Please listen for a word from God from 2 Timothy 1:16-18

16May the Lord show mercy to the family of Onesiphorus, because he cheered me up many times. He was not ashamed that I am in prison, 17but as soon as he arrived in Rome, he started looking for me until he found me. 18May the Lord grant him his mercy on that Day! And you know very well how much he did for me in Ephesus. (2 Timothy 1:16-18, GNB)

This is a word from God to the people of God. Thanks be to God.

I need to confess something to you.

I felt a little jealous this week as I wrote our sermon for today.

I was jealous because pastor Elaine's text for last week's sermon in our "Bold and Untold" series had a funny cuss word hidden within the story.

I won't say that cuss again this week, but will just remind you that it was the old, King James English way to say donkey.

In my text for today's sermon, there is no funny cuss word hidden within the story.

But since I'm a writer, and therefore am allowed to play with words, I decided to create one.

So this week, whenever I saw something that astonished me, I would exclaim, "Holy Onesiphorus!"

Or whenever something frustrated or angered me, I'd exclaim, "Onesiphorus!"

And I felt better.

Thank you for hearing my confession.

As one of your pastors, I give you permission to use my new cuss word any time you need it!

Amen.

This morning, let's shine the gospel light on a bold person whose story needs to be told named Onesiphorus.

Echo his name with me to make sure you get it.

Onesiphorus.

Onesiphorus.

Onesiphorus.

Great! Now you have it in case you need it (wink wink).

Let's see Onesiphorus as "The face of mercy."

In our text, the Greek word translated as "mercy" is ἔλεος (eleos). At its core, ἔλεος means active compassion, pity, and lovingkindness.

It means relieving distress.

It refers to God's steadfast love through us that provides help, soothing, and comfort to those who are suffering or in deep need.

Isn't there a need for ἔλεος, mercy in our 'ἔλεος'less, merciless world?

In his book *Jesus the Liberator*, the brilliant Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino, who has spent the largest part of his life and work in El Salvador, writes of "integral" liberation in the true sense, that it is

"...the Kingdom of God coming to be a reality and human beings coming to be simply human." (Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*)

In another of his books, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People Down from the Cross*, Sobrino writes there is a need in our world today for 'Intellectus misericordiae,' an understanding of mercy.

So let's ask these questions together.

What does it mean to be simply human?

What does the face of mercy look like?

I've discovered that one of the meanings for 'being human,' one of the pictures of 'the face of mercy' can be found in what I call 'The 4 C's.'

The 4 C's (Compassion, Commitment, Curiosity, and Courage)

Compassion

What does it mean to be simply human?

Perhaps it begins with allowing our hearts to remain open in a world that keeps teaching us to close them. Every day we are tempted to build hearts of stone—to protect ourselves, to pass by, to convince ourselves that someone else's suffering belongs to someone else. But God has always desired something different. God longs to give us hearts of flesh, hearts that still know how to break, still know how to love.

Jesus tells us the story of the Good Samaritan, and Gustavo Gutiérrez reminds us that our neighbor is not simply the person who happens to cross our path. The neighbor is the one in whose path we place ourselves. Mercy is not accidental. Mercy is a choice to move toward another human being.

When the Samaritan saw the wounded man, he did not stop because religion demanded it. He stopped because, as Luke tells us, he was moved with compassion. The Greek word *splankhnizein* means something even deeper. It means his heart was melting. Love became flesh within him. Compassion was not an idea he believed; it was something he embodied.

So what does the face of mercy look like?

It looks like someone who crosses the road instead of crossing their arms. It looks like someone who kneels beside another's pain instead of explaining it away. It looks like a heart of flesh that refuses to become a heart of stone. The face of mercy is simply human because it reflects the very heart of God made visible in ordinary people who dare to love.

## Commitment

Commitment is one of the holiest words I know. It isn't loud. It doesn't demand applause. It simply keeps showing up.

I think that's how God has always loved us. God committed God's very self to us in Jesus—not from a distance, but with dusty feet, tired eyes, open hands, and a heart that never stopped making room for people everyone else had forgotten. When we choose to remain with someone through grief, illness, disappointment, or failure, we begin to look a little more like Jesus. We become simply human because we stop pretending that strength means standing alone. We discover that to be human is to belong to one another.

Commitment also reveals the face of mercy. Mercy isn't pity. Mercy stays. Mercy sits beside the hospital bed, waits outside the detention center, shares bread at the soup table, answers the late-night phone call, and refuses to abandon hope when hope seems foolish. Mercy says, "I will not leave you," long before it says, "I can fix this."

The Upside Down Kingdom is built by ordinary people making extraordinary commitments to love. Every promise faithfully kept becomes a small sacrament, revealing that God's mercy still walks barefoot through this world, one faithful step at a time.

## Curiosity

I've come to believe that curiosity is one of God's first gifts to humanity. Before we learn to speak, we wonder. We reach for butterflies, ask impossible questions, and stare at stars

with hearts wide open. Curiosity reminds us that we were never created to have all the answers. We were created to love enough to keep asking. Every person carries a story deeper than the one we see. When we become curious instead of judgmental, we make room for our neighbors to become teachers instead of strangers. That's how we become simply human—by seeing one another as mysteries worthy of reverence.

Curiosity reveals the face of mercy. It keeps asking, “How are you today?” and sticks around to listen to the answer. It sits on the brick wall with someone who has nowhere else to go. It visits the prisoner, welcomes the immigrant, shares a meal with the lonely, and believes every person bears the image of God, even when the world has forgotten.

The Upside Down Kingdom grows wherever curiosity opens the door and refuses to close it. Curiosity has a patient face. It listens before it speaks, remains instead of rescuing, and loves before it understands everything. That's what Jesus did, and that's what makes us beautifully, simply human.

## Courage

When folks hear the name Nero, they usually think of chaos, cruelty, “fiddling while Rome burned,” and the madness of unchecked power. He was the emperor of Rome when the Apostle Paul lived under house arrest, chained not because he had stolen or murdered, but because he dared to proclaim another Lord besides Caesar. Nero ruled with wealth beyond imagination while ordinary people struggled beneath the weight of the empire. He believed fear could hold the world together.

But empires have always misunderstood the quiet strength of mercy.

While Nero commanded armies, one ordinary disciple named Onesiphorus quietly walked the streets of Rome searching for a forgotten prisoner. Paul tells us he searched “for me until he found me.” Imagine that. In a city where association with a condemned man could cost you everything, Onesiphorus kept knocking on doors until he found his brother.

That is the Upside Down Kingdom.

Nero wielded swords. Onesiphorus carried compassion.

Nero was indifferent. Onesiphorus had commitment.

Nero had palaces. Onesiphorus had courage.

Nero had blind certainty. Onesiphorus had curiosity.

Nero's name is remembered for terror. Onesiphorus is remembered because he refused to be ashamed of a suffering friend.

Sometimes history is not changed by emperors. Sometimes it is changed by the people who simply refuse to stop looking for one another.

Conclusion:

My friends, perhaps the question is not whether we are strong enough to change the world. Perhaps the question is whether we are willing to love the person standing in front of us, behind us, beside us, and all around us.

Paul never tells us that Onesiphorus preached a great sermon, performed a miracle, or held a position of power. He simply says that he searched for Paul diligently, found him in Rome, and was not ashamed of his chains. That is enough. Sometimes the holiest thing a person can do is to search for people and, with bare feet and open heart, sit beside them.

So what does it mean to be simply human?

It means remembering that we belong to one another. It means choosing compassion over cruelty, presence over performance, and courage over comfort. To be simply human is to recognize the image of God in every person—the prisoner, the refugee, the neighbor, the one who grieves, the one everyone else has forgotten. We become most fully human not when we climb above others, but when we kneel beside them.

And how does Onesiphorus show us the face of mercy?

He reminds us that mercy has feet. Mercy goes looking. Mercy crosses dangerous streets. Mercy knocks on prison doors. Mercy refuses to let fear have the final word. Mercy says, “You are not alone,” and then stays long enough to prove it.

That is the Upside Down Kingdom Jesus came proclaiming. A kingdom where love is measured not by our words but by our willingness to draw near. A kingdom where the forgotten are remembered, the lonely are accompanied, and the suffering are embraced as siblings.

Story:

It was early in the morning, before dawn, and the brick wall between Stone Avenue and the mercy center was dimly lit by a flickering 40 watt bulb above the side entrance to the building.

Saint Frank sat on the wall, still and small, offering his morning prayers.

Brother Juniper walked up the sidewalk slowly and surely, and sat down beside Frank without making a sound.

“Good morning, friend,” he whispered. “Mind if I join you?”

“Sure,” answered Frank. “I’m glad you’re here. I was feeling a bit lonely, but now you’re here. Thank you.”

Both made the sign of the cross and spoke the ancient words, “In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Then they were silent.

Why?

Aren’t prayers built on words?

Not for Frank and Juniper.

They prayed with their ears.

And their hearts.

With the ears of their hearts.

They prayed with their hands and feet.

And their lives.

Their lives were prayers.

“Preach the gospel at all times,” was the old saying. “When necessary, use words.”

“Yes,” they thought. “We hope this is us.”

As they listened that morning, they finally heard God say what God said every morning, “Frank and Junior, children of God, go out into the world and sit at the lunch tables with people no one else wants to sit with. Listen to their stories. Tell them yours. Become their friends.”

They smiled at God.

Said, “Amen.”

Then headed out into the sunrise to sit with James in the open, overgrown space behind the library, visit Tanya at the jail, see Mike in front of the mission, and have lunch with Wanda at the Goodwill store.

They went to practice a Theology of the Neighbor.

They went to practice friendship.

They went to be a prayer for the world, and to let the world be a prayer for them.

May we leave this place with the heart of Onesiphorus, the compassion of Christ, and the simple joy of Saint Francis—living lives so full of mercy that others catch a glimpse of the face of God every time we choose to love.

Benediction

No matter who you are or what you've done  
who you love or what you've lost  
where you've gone or where you've stayed  
there will always be a seat for you at Triune Mercy  
because you are a beloved child of God

### Father's Day Prayer

Dear God,

On this Father's Day, we give thanks for fathers and father figures, for grandfathers and uncles, mentors and coaches, teachers and neighbors, and all those who have shown us something of your love through their care.

We thank you for the fathers who worked long hours, who taught us to ride bicycles, throw baseballs, fix broken things, tell good stories, say our prayers, and keep going when life was hard. We thank you for every act of kindness, every sacrifice made quietly, every steady presence that helped us know we were loved.

And yet, O God, we remember that this day is not easy for everyone.

Some grieve fathers who have died and whose voices they long to hear again. Some carry wounds from fathers who were absent, hurtful, or unable to give the love they themselves never received. Some long to be fathers and cannot. Some have lost children. Some carry complicated memories that are difficult to name.

Hold them all with your merciful and tender heart.

Teach us that your love is deeper than our failures and wider than our sorrows. Gather the joyful and the grieving, the thankful and the wounded, around your table of grace.

And help us become people who nurture life in others, who encourage the weary, protect the vulnerable, listen with open hearts, and love generously.

For in every act of compassion, every word of encouragement, every hand extended in friendship, we catch a glimpse of you—the Father of mercies and the God of all tenderness.

Amen.