

Notes for a sermon preached for the Episcopal Church of the Nativity, on 7 June 2026 (Proper 5A), by the Rev'd Dr. J. Barrington Bates, Priest-in-Charge.

A few years ago, I had a neighbor with two small children: a boy and a girl. The boy was one of those “rough and tumble” types. You wouldn’t take him anywhere *near* an antique shop, if you know what I mean.

And, by the age of three, he had already taught his one-year-old little sister everything he knew.

So the two of them would just lash out—smacking each other, their parents, their friends—whenever something upset them.

You can just imagine what the folks at day care thought when they saw them coming. And their Sunday School teachers would just run and hide! They were terrors.

One day I witnessed an exchanged between the two siblings. The boy had taken the girl’s toy—something like that.

But instead of her hitting him, as I had seen so many times before (something that resulted in him hitting her back—and harder)... Instead of hitting, she yelled out “Mercy.”

And her brother gave her back her toy.

“I’m teaching them about mercy,” her mother said, with an awkward smile.

Well, learning about mercy is exactly what Jesus suggests we should do in today’s gospel passage. And he contrasts mercy to something we may, at first, think as odd—sacrifice.

When we look in a dictionary, we get a number of antonyms for mercy: things like cruelty, brutality, and vindictiveness.

But not sacrifice.

And for the opposite of sacrifice, we tend to think of things like selfishness, self-indulgence, or stinginess.

So, “I desire selfishness, not cruelty?”

“self-indulgence instead of vindictiveness?”

“stinginess instead of brutality?”

None of these possibilities seems to make any sense.

So, what could Jesus mean when he says, “Learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’”?

Well, first of all, we need to look at the concept of sacrifice. In Christianity, we’ve appropriated the term, and we apply it to Jesus’ mortal sacrifice on the cross, and the church’s ongoing sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving at the altar.

And in our culture, we think mostly of sacrifice as self-giving.

One of the most self-giving figures I’ve known personally is Edmond Lee Browning, the first modern Anglican saint to be featured in my preaching here at Nativity this summer.

Oh, he’s not officially been declared a saint—at least not *yet*.

But of anyone deserves that moniker, it is Ed Browning.

You may recall that he presided over a number of scandals in his term as our primate, although none of the scandals had anything to do with him personally.

Remember Ellen Cooke, the treasurer of the Episcopal Church who embezzled more than \$2 million? That wasn’t the half of it.

Back in 1986, he began to address the deepening rift within our church over issues such as the ordination of women and gay folk. (Seems like a long time ago, doesn’t it?)

His words on the subject have resonance today: “Do not ask me to honor one set of views and disregard the other. I may agree with one, but I will respect both. The unity of the church will be maintained not because we agree on everything but because—hopefully—we will leave judgement to God.”

Sage words indeed.

He is probably best remembered for saying this: “I want to be very clear: this church of our is open to all—there will be no outcasts—the convictions and hopes of all will be honored.”

“There will be no outcasts”—I used to have that on a T-shirt, and my sister sewed it into a quilt for me some years ago.

After he retired, old Ed Browning preached at my ordination to the diaconate at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

It was the practice in the Diocese of California for all of the ordinands—anyone in the ordination process and those about to be ordained later that week—to attend a retreat at what is called the Bishop’s Ranch.

About 30 of us, with our bishop and Bishop Browning. Sharing meals, worshipping together, and having sometimes profound and often quite humorous conversations.

At the end of our week together, at the last meal, Ed Browning came and sat by me.

He said, “We haven’t much talked, Barrie, and I’d like to get to know you better.”

I confessed to him then that I had been avoiding personal encounters with him. He was an idol of mine (if I can use that word), someone I admired, someone I hoped to emulate in some small and inadequate way.

“More than any other single person, you have made my ordination possible,” I told him.

And you know what he said in reply? “I’m just another broken human being, so, please, show me some mercy.”

Mercy: those two children, and those two adults.

And everyone here.

So, this week, my practical advice to you is simple: *show mercy*.

Call that long-estranged friend or relative and instead of retribution, wage reconciliation.

Reach out to those who disagree with you, and *listen attentively* to what they have to say.

Go to someone who has hurt you, and stir up the courage to say those simple but powerful three words: “I forgive you.”

These acts sound simple, but we all know how hard they are.

By waging reconciliation, listening attentively, or daring to say “I forgive you” we are showing mercy.

For to show mercy is to demonstrate that we really know what it means to heed the call of the one who says, “Come. Follow me.” Amen.