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Sermon: “God’s Mercy Endures Forever” (Psalm 107)  
October 30, 2011

Someone recently emailed me about the following event that occurred in a church one Sunday morning:

A few minutes before the church service started, the congregation was chatting in their pews when, suddenly, Satan appeared at the front of the church. Everyone started screaming and running for the back entrance, trampling each other in a frantic effort to get away. Soon the church was empty except for one elderly gentleman who remained calmly in his pew.

Satan walked up to the man and asked, “Do you know who I am?”

The man replied, “Sure do.”

“Aren't you afraid of me?” Satan asked.

“Nope,” replied the man.

“Don't you realize I can kill you with one word and cause you horrifying agony for all eternity?” persisted Satan.

“Yes.”

“And you're still not afraid?” asked Satan.

“Nope,” said the old man.

More than a little perturbed, Satan asked, “Why aren't you afraid of me?”

The man replied, “I’ve been married to your sister for forty years” 😊.

I’m not going to try and segue that into the sermon, I just thought it was hilarious and wanted to share it with you—if you’re married, hopefully you don’t see your spouse as a sibling of Satan, if you do, well, we’ll pray for you 😊.

It’s been said that all good things must come to an end.

Often that is the case in our lives; the good things rarely seem to last.

Perhaps you have been on a date that was going really well and the several hours felt like a few moments, and you didn’t want that date to end, ever, but it did.
Or perhaps you have been to a concert that was so moving that you didn’t want it to ever end. Or maybe you’ve experienced this when reading a great novel or watching a favorite TV series. As my family watched the final moments of the series finale of the powerful TV show, *Friday Night Lights*, one of my daughters literally sobbed, “I don’t want it to be over.”

This past week I watched one of my daughters play her final field hockey game for Albemarle High School, the end of a four-year run, and I must confess that as the final whistle was blown I “had a moment.”

I know you can relate.

And this idea that all good things must come to an end is often experienced on a much deeper level. Sometimes a couple can come to a point in their relationship when they ask themselves ala Diana Ross and the Supremes, “Where did our love go?”—or a season of financial prosperity can come to an abrupt end with a job lay-off or a dive in the stock market; or you suddenly have a falling out with someone who for many years was a close friend; or you begin to notice your physical vitality or looks diminishing somewhat as the years take their toll, a line here, a grey hair there, or losing hair there... right?

One afternoon last summer I was visiting someone in a nursing home and as I stood in the hall waiting to enter their room I noticed another man in his room. The door was wide open and the walls were covered, literally covered, with diplomas and awards and photos of him with famous dignitaries of the past; and yet he was sitting alone, staring out the window at the parking lot, with *The Price is Right* blaring from his TV set. The prestige of his past had come to an end, and he was alone.

Life appears to demonstrate over and over again that indeed all good things must come to an end, right? Well, almost, but not quite.

Today I’m preaching about something that is good and that never comes to an end, the mercy of God. The first verse of Psalm 107 states, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, and his mercy endures forever.”

The Bible tells us that God’s mercy endures forever, that “his mercies never come to an end... they are new every morning” (Lamentations 3:22-23).

Mercy can be defined as “compassionate or kindly forbearance shown toward an offender, an enemy, or other person in one's power” or “kindness in excess of what may be expected or demanded by fairness.”

The Bible describes all of these aspects of God’s mercy toward us. The good news of the gospel is that although we are indeed in God’s power and although we have offended God through our sin, that God is a gracious God, that God is moved with compassion for us, that God is excessively kind to us. God is a merciful God.
In fact the Hebrew word translated as “mercy” in Psalm 107 is *hesed*, which can also be translated as “love” or “grace.” *Hesed* refers to God’s having a kind disposition toward us all the time, regardless of others’ disposition toward us, regardless of our disposition toward ourselves.

And God’s *hesed*, his mercy, never comes to an end; it lasts forever and ever.

Have you ever gotten a song stuck in your head, or maybe a jingle from a commercial? This is especially the case when the song or jingle is annoying, right? You may hear it on the way to work or school and it refuses to let you alone, tormenting you repeatedly throughout the day. Or perhaps in the middle of the night you’re having a hard time sleeping and that song or jingle continues to resound in your mind. Scientists refer to these as “earworms.”

About ten years ago Steph and I took our four young daughters to Disneyworld for the day, and we made the mistake of going on the ride, “It’s a Small World After All,” in which you journey through this magical mountain where an endless array of puppets representing every conceivable culture in the world sing this song over and over again. It is nothing short of brutal, and of course, as soon as the ride ended, the girls all wanted to go again, so being the pushover dad that I am, I went again, and then again. “It’s a Small World After All” remained as an earworm wiggling through my brain for weeks. I almost resorted to calling Dr. Phil 😁.

Some earworms are annoying but not harmful. Other earworms can be destructive—the memories in your head of hurtful things others have spoken to you or that you’ve spoken to yourselves, voices of condemnation and accusation, earworms that refuse to stop wiggling and squirming in your brain.

That’s why it is helpful to know that this idea of God’s mercy lasting forever is a recurring theme in scripture. In other words, it is something God wants stuck in our head. “(God’s) mercy endures forever” is not only found in Psalm 107, but in many other Psalms as well, often repeatedly. In Psalm 136 the refrain, “for his mercy endures forever” is used twenty-six times. Psalm 136 begins:

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Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,  
for his mercy endures forever.  
Give thanks to the God of gods,  
for his mercy endures forever.  
Give thanks to the Lord of lords,  
for his mercy endures forever. 
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Twenty-six times in one psalm: “his mercy endures forever… his mercy endures forever… his mercy endures forever…” over and over again. Why?
Because in our lives we need God’s mercy over and over again; because in our lives we often experience good things coming to an end; because we need to be reminded again and again that God’s mercy, God’s love, God’s grace toward us never ends, ever.

Sometimes it’s helpful to consider what something is not in order to see more clearly what something is. What if the recurring refrain from Psalms, “his mercy endures forever,” was the opposite: “his wrath endures forever”?

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,  
for his wrath endures forever.  
Give thanks to the God of gods,  
for his wrath endures forever.  
Give thanks to the Lord of lords,  
for his wrath endures forever.

What if the Bible stated that “the wrath of the Lord never comes to an end; it is new every morning”? Every new morning was a beginning of another day of wrath. That would be pretty bleak. And yet there are many people who focus more on God’s wrath than his mercy.

When I was a senior in college I worked part-time as a cashier at a grocery store. One busy Saturday afternoon there was a long line of customers, all in a delightful mood because there’s nothing more fun than standing in a long line at the grocery store. I was scanning the items as quickly as I could and keying in the various codes for the produce when I committed a mortal sin, I mistakenly keyed in the wrong code for one of the produce items. “Stop!” the customer yelled at me. “You just keyed in the code for celery,” and picking up what I thought was celery, he yelled some more, “This is not celery, young man. This is bok-choy!” (Stop the presses, right?). He then proceeded to lecture me on how I needed to learn to identify produce better and how he used to work at a grocery store and how many produce codes he had to memorize in his day, all quite fascinating. I remember thinking to myself as he left, “Okay, mister, why don’t you work on your social skills and I’ll work on my bok-choy identification skills” 😊.

At the end of the day if you have trouble readily discerning the differences between celery and bok-choy, you’ll probably be okay, the world will probably keep turning.

On the other hand, distinguishing the differences between what lasts forever can actually make a difference in your life. Knowing that the Bible is explicitly clear, over and over again, that the mercy of God, not the wrath of God, endures forever, can make all the difference in the world. It can free you up to thankfully receive God’s mercy again and again, and maybe even be a little more merciful to others, or perhaps even be a little more merciful to… yourself.

Now for a few illustrations about mercy…
When I was in high school one of my favorite albums was *So* by Peter Gabriel, released in 1986. I listened to it many times on my Sony Walkman (that dates me a bit 😊), and I remember being particularly moved by the song *Mercy Street*, in which Gabriel sings, “Dreaming of Mercy Street…dreaming of mercy in your daddy's arms again…dreaming of Mercy Street…looking for mercy in your daddy's arms.” It’s a beautiful song that touches on a deep longing we all have.

The good news of the gospel is that mercy is more than just a dream. *Mercy Street* is a real place, for we have indeed received mercy in the arms of our Heavenly Father. In his death on the cross Jesus, God in Christ, endured the wrath of God for our sins in our place, the ultimate demonstration of mercy. In his Letter to the Ephesians Paul put it this way: “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:4-5). And God’s mercy endures forever.

One classic description of mercy is from Shakespeare’s comedy *The Merchant of Venice*, in which the wealthy heiress, Portia, has this to say about mercy:

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The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this scepterd sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice (Act IV, scene 1).
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And that is exactly what happened when Jesus died on the cross for you and me: God’s mercy gently dropped from heaven as Jesus’ blood gently dropped to the ground; God’s mercy seasoned justice, once for all.

And Jesus knew that we would need to be reminded again and again that God’s mercy endures forever, that no matter what good things come to an end in our lives God’s mercy never comes to an end. Each week when we receive Holy Communion with empty hands we are reminded that God’s mercy endures forever, especially as we pray the Prayer of Humble Access:
“We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies… thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy” (BCP 337).

Every October I enjoy watching the World Series, and the seven-game battle this year between the Rangers and Cardinals was one for the ages. I am particularly fascinated by when a manager decides to relieve the starting pitcher, which I see as a poignant picture of mercy. It is not the starting pitcher’s decision as to when he needs relief; it is the manager’s decision. And when the manager decides the starting pitcher needs to be relieved, he walks to the mound himself, he does not send an assistant. When he arrives at the mound he gently takes the ball from the starting pitcher’s hand, and then gives it to the relief pitcher. The fate of the game is, literally, out of the starting pitcher’s hands. He walks to the dugout to rest.

When it comes to God’s mercy, it’s the same with us. When we’re all alone on the mound, in over our head with the game slipping away, God has mercy on us. God takes the initiative and walks to the mound, takes the burden away, and places it on Jesus, the ultimate relief pitcher who saves the game every single time. Our fate rests in his hands, not ours. We rest in the dugout, which, of course, is the church.

One more illustration…earlier this fall I read a volume of letters written by General Robert E. Lee. On June 30, 1864, in the midst of the horrors of the Civil War, he penned a letter to his wife on their thirty-third wedding anniversary. Near the end of this letter he wrote:

“God has been very merciful and kind to us, and how thankless and sinful I have been. I pray that he may continue his mercies and blessings to us, and give us a little peace and rest together in this world, and finally gather us… around His throne in the world to come.”

General Lee got it exactly right. God indeed has been “very merciful and kind to us” and we are often “thankless and sinful” in response. But the good news is that although many good things must come to an end, the recurring refrain in Scripture is that God’s mercy never comes to an end, that God’s mercy endures forever, that one day God will indeed gather us around his throne on Mercy Street, where we will indeed find everlasting mercy in our Daddy’s arms. Amen.