

“Mercy and Truth”

Psalm 85:8-13

Thesis: *What God’s people here in Sewanee can learn from meditating on the divine mercy and truth bestows upon us.*

Part I. Introduction

Collect:

Part II. Move 1 (Point 1) – We are all standing in the need of mercy.

Ponder verses 8 and 9 of the 85th Psalm:

*8 I will listen to what the LORD God is saying, *
for he is speaking peace to his faithful people
and to those who turn their hearts to him.*

*9 Truly, his salvation is very near to those who fear him, *
that his glory may dwell in our land.*

On my 6th day here as a seminarian in the Sewanee School of Theology, I ventured over to Winchester to get a haircut because I wanted to look my best for Morning and Prayer at the Chapel of the Apostles. As I entered that barber shop in downtown Winchester, I immediately noticed a look of contempt upon the Master Barber’s face. He asked (with a Southern drawl), “May I help you?” I replied with a smile, “Hello! I would love a haircut.” The Master Barber looked me up and down a few times and bluntly said, “No.” “No?” I asked him curiously. The Barber stated an emphatic “No.” When I politely asked him why, he said quite matter-of-factly, “Because I don’t cut *your kind*.” **Black lives matter.** At this point, I called upon the *Thinking Black Man’s Survival Guide*. Rule #1: If you find yourself in a hostile environment where your presence is neither wanted or needed, remove yourself from said environment posthaste. I thanked the Master Barber for his time, wished him a good day, and left. My adherence to Rule #1 prevented either of two unfortunate outcomes. If I had demanded service, the Master Barber could have called the police and attempted to have me

arrested for trespassing. Or: if I had gotten into a verbal altercation with the Master Barber, perhaps he pulls out a gun, shoots me, and later tells the police he feared for his life. It wouldn't have mattered that I was wearing a tailored suit. It wouldn't have mattered that I had hundreds of dollars in my wallet. In his place of business, I was totally subject to his rules and his prejudice.

Black lives matter. Before I came to Sewanee, I was a nationally syndicated newspaper Columnist. I wrote passionately and frequently on the Black Lives Matter movement – as well as the events which launched the movement. For my audacity in stating in print my beliefs that God's people must rise above indifference and feigned ignorance and come together to address racism in America in meaningful ways, I have been called everything but a child of God. I have been called a racist, a socialist, a fascist, a troublemaker, a man unfit for ministry, and a false Christian. Imagine picking up your hometown newspaper and seeing at the top of the front page a declarative statement from an anonymous person stating that "I think Reverend Jones needs to be sent back to Africa." Point of fact, I've never been to Africa. Imagine reading in the local rave-and-rave section, "This newspaper is perpetuating a huge fraud. Reverend Jones cannot possibly be the true author of his so-called column because everyone knows that black men don't read Shakespeare." Imagine the sadness of witnessing a white woman in an elevator wedge herself in a corner against a stainless steel wall because she's afraid that [a] I want her purse and its contents, or [b] I want her body. If you can imagine any of these things, you have a glimpse of what it's like to walk in my shoes. Welcome to my world.

You may not find Confederate flags upon Sewanee's domain – but as soon as you leave our bubble, and drive a few miles away in any direction, you enter the real world. In the real world, God's people are hurling insults at each other. 2016 presidential candidates are fanning racial flames strictly for political gain. People on both sides of the black lives matter debate are being injured and even killed. Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.

Whether you love the Confederate flag or hate it, it is a polarizing symbol. That flag was designated as the banner of unity and solidarity for Southern states throughout some of the darkest days of this great nation's history. Slavery. The Jim Crow era. Segregation. Along with the burning cross, the

Confederate flag was prominently displayed as savage acts of discrimination and desecration were committed by individuals and organizations dedicated to keeping the members of certain racial groups in their place. That flag was present as murders, bombings, lynchings, and beatings took place. The victims of those crimes against humanity were denied their own history, their own heritage, and their own Constitutionally-established right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Proponents of the Old South loudly proclaim that their ancestors deserve to be honored for defending their cultures, traditions, and beliefs. And to that, I say: what about my ancestors' cultures, traditions, and beliefs – or the lack thereof? **Their lives mattered.**

We are all standing in the need of prayer. None of us are perfect. Most of us have seen wrong take place right in front of us, and said nothing. Most of us have heard our friends and family members say racially-charged things about a person or a group of people, and offered nothing in the way of correction. Most of us have been in the position to help someone from a different ethnic background, but didn't because we were too busy, too tired, or too indifferent.

What if God treated us the way we treat each other? What if He was too busy to protect us? Too tired to bless us? Too indifferent to save us?

Of mercy, Matthew chapter 5, verse 7 reads thusly:
Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

God is speaking peace to His faithful people – are you listening? Which brings me to...

Point 2:

Part III. Move 2 (Point 2) – We all long for the truth – God's divine truth.

Consider verse 11 of the 85th Psalm:
11 Truth shall spring up from the earth,
and righteousness shall look down from heaven.*

As we run this Christian race, we must seek The Lord's truth. **Black lives**

matter. We have all heard this phrase invoked in news reports, or read it in newspapers, magazines, and websites. Perhaps some of you have participated in marches... or engaged in silent protests... or attended special church services held in honor of that phrase. Do black lives indeed matter? Is this declaration theoretical? Or actual?

Allow me to state an inconvenient truth. Everyone is not convinced that black lives matter. Some people believe that in order for black lives to matter more, white lives must somehow matter less. Some people are offended when they hear the phrase “black lives matter”; and their immediate response is “police lives matter.” I’ve even seen bumper stickers which say “my dogs matter” or “mushrooms matter.” I find it telling that some individuals find it so easy to make light of a topic as serious as racism.

Of course, everyone is fully entitled to their opinions on this subject – whatever those opinions happen to be. How you feel about racism probably depends on a lot of factors – such as where you grew up, your system of faith, your level of education, your socioeconomic status, and whether or not you have meaningful friendships with persons of color.

There’s nothing wrong with white privilege, so long as there is black privilege, brown privilege, etc. Black people – young or old, rich or poor – are your brothers and sisters in Christ. We too were wonderfully and fearfully made in God’s holy image. We too are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We also have hopes and fears, peaks and valleys, good days and bad days. Christ Jesus died on the cross to save us, as well. **That’s the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but divine truth.**

Of truth, John chapter 4, verse 24 says:

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

Can you handle the divine truth? That brings me to...

Point 3:

Part III. Move 3 (Point 3) – Mercy + truth = righteousness.

Reflect upon verse 13 of the 85th Psalm:
*13 Righteousness shall go before him, *
 and peace shall be a pathway for his feet.*

The word **righteousness** is a noun – and is defined as “the state of moral perfection required by God to enter heaven.” Or course, human beings are inherently incapable of ever achieving perfection. However, we can pursue it. We pursue it by committing ourselves to perfect submission to God’s laws and commandments. By freely choosing to do things The Lord’s way rather than our own way. By not leaning not on our own understanding, but rather on God’s infinite wisdom and kindness.

God’s mercy + God’s truth = righteousness. Righteousness is doing what is right because it’s right – because it’s pleasing in the sight of He who is able to keep us from falling... and to present us in the presence of his glory with exceeding joy. I am blessed with outstanding Professors and Deans in the School of Theology.

Jeremy Carlson, Sinclair Ender, Lori Fehr, Ricardo Sheppard, Amanda Stephenson, and Jay Tucker are among my closest friends here at Sewanee. Some are married with children, some are single. Four of those individuals are white, and two are black. Two lawyers, a governmental specialist, a Marine, an academician, and an entrepreneur. I love every one of them – and their families. **I would die for any one of them in a heartbeat; for no greater love hath a man than to lay down his life for his friends.** I eat, worship, pray, study with, learn from and talk to these people on a daily basis. My life matters because their lives matter. Their lives matter because my life matters. We are interconnected. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We are family.

If you are white, it is my fondest wish that someday, you will find a person of color who means as much to you as my friend Ricardo Sheppard means to me. If you are black, it is my fervent hope that before you leave this wonderful University, you will encounter a white person who means as much to you as my friend Amanda Stephenson means to me.

Whenever I’m having a bad day, or I’m feeling under the weather, I know with certainty that if I see Jeremy Carlson or receive a text from him,

everything is going to be alright. Jeremy and I can talk about anything – including race – and be even closer for having the discussion.

2 Timothy chapter 2, verse 22 encourages us this way on the issue of righteousness:

So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

Are you willing to pursue righteousness?

Part V. Conclusion/Summary (for “Mercy and Truth”)

In conclusion, I stand here on God’s word and boldly proclaim that some things need to die. All forms of discrimination, every molecule of hatred, and all episodes of apathy must perish from this earth. As long as one person of color is denied the ability to vote at the ballot box, I will declare that **black lives matter**. As long as unarmed black men are killed either in police custody or while encountering police, I will declare that **black lives matter**. As long as racial tensions exist on this campus – or any other campus – I will reaffirm that **black lives matter**.

The Lord is always in control. Nothing happens to you or to me or to us He does not allow. And everything that happens – whether good or bad – is for our greatest good. Having said that, I remind you that faith without works is dead. It’s not enough to simply wish that racism didn’t exist. We have to roll up our sleeves, get informed on the issues, and do something.

As I close, I humbly ask you to partner with the African American Alliance, Hispanic Organization of Latino Awareness, the Asian Organization, and/or the other student organizations here at the University of the South dedicated to fighting for mercy, truth, and righteousness framed in equality upon this domain. If mankind could put a man on the moon in the 1960s with a single computer mainframe with half the computing capacity than your I-phone with no internet, then surely we can ensure racial harmony in this community. **Black lives matter. All lives matter. I matter. You matter. We matter. Sewanee matters.** Because the Lord our God tells us so. **Amen.**