

The African Methodist Episcopal Church
The Council of Bishops Worship
Wednesday, 21 June 2023
New Orleans, Louisiana

Jeffrey N. Leath
128th Bishop
Text: 1 Samuel 2:25
Title: ***Mercy!***

Senior Bishop Adam Jefferson Richardson, Worship Leader; President of the Council of Bishops, Bishop Stafford Joe Nathan Wicker; President of the General Board, Bishop Paul J.M. Kawimbe; Bishops of the Church; Episcopal Supervisors; General Officers; The Judicial Council; Connectional Officers; Trustees of AME, Inc.; Presidents and Deans of our the Educational Institutions; Presiding Elders; Clergy; Laity; Distinguished Visitors; Friends; and those who join us via the internet; we greet you with love and humility in Christ Jesus!

Congratulations & Blessings to the President of the Council of Bishops, Bishop Wicker! God bless you with wisdom, strength, courage, and peace of heart as you lead us this year.

Special prayers of blessing on Episcopal Supervisor (WMS), the Rev. Dr. Constance Belin Wicker, and the Wicker Family, as you provide the love and support which bring encouragement and comfort to the President during his term.

Thanks to the Eighth Episcopal District for the kind and compassionate hosting over these days. We are grateful for those who minister to us in song in this worship. Appreciation to the many who make gatherings such as this seem easy: Drs. Henderson & Cooper, with their staffs & special appreciation to Meeting Planner Blaylock.

We do not take for granted those who operate sound and video, usher us, secure us, prepare sacramental elements and other logistical partners, including those who keep our space neat and clean!

Appreciation to the Chaplains who support us with physical & virtual presence, and with their prayers. Thank you to those who support me in the Ecumenical and Endorser ministries of our Zion.

I am grateful for the introduction by Bishop E. Earl McCloud, my friend and colleague.

Thanks, and Love, to those who continue to pour encouragement into my life with counsel and prayer, on both sides of the Jordan. I honor my ancestors, the Rev. NH Leath, who served as a pastor and presiding elder in Florida; the Rev. Dr. James F. Leath, born & raised in Florida, called

to preach/ordained in New Jersey; pastored in New Jersey, Connecticut, and New York; Mommie, looking from above; and others too numerous to name.

The Rev. Dr. Jennifer S. Leath (my firstborn), is worshipping with us from Geneva, Switzerland as she fulfills an ecumenical assignment on the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches. Love to you!

Love to my second and last-born children and grandchildren: Victoria, Jeffrey II (Shamaiah), Lamai & Jade. Hugs and gratitude to all my family!

Special Appreciation & Acknowledgement to my blessing for 50 years of companionship and 45 years of marriage: Susan V. Jones Leath, MD! I love you! Thanks for the prayers and presence in my heart.

In the interest of time, the spoken word is presented with a minimum of digression. This manuscript may have notes, anecdotes and anticipated humor/sarcasm not shared at the live, preaching moment, or not.

1 Samuel 2:25 (NRSVue) *“If one person sins against another, someone can intercede for the sinner with the Lord, but if someone sins against the Lord, who can make intercession?” But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the Lord to kill them.*

Mercy!

While I am sure you would like to hear how no weapon formed against you shall prosper¹, or when your unavailable annuity contributions will be restored, the lectionary text for today presents a more sobering question: who will advocate for us when we sin against God?!

We may sing, “it is well with my soul,” but the reality is that many among us are angry, frustrated, feeling violated, disregarded, insulted, silenced, unheard and abused. Fearing the future, faintheartedly fulfilling minimal expectations in an environment of distrust. Hearing the cry of care, but listening for the trumpet of a plan to pierce the silence, the faithful do as they usually do. We ring the bell of a storied past; tell each other how wonderful we are; find solace from an in-person fellowship; and prepare to return home with more questions (and less hope) than when we began.

Personally, and institutionally, we know nothing is too hard for God. We believe God CAN make a way somehow. Yet, the political drama is increasingly less entertaining as we find ourselves camping closer to the Jordan. Our offspring question our loyalty to the Titanic as we wave on the life boats and stand firmly on the deck singing “Nearer my God to Thee” and “The Church is Moving On.”

¹ Isaiah 54:17 (NRSVue) *No weapon that is fashioned against you shall prosper, and you shall confute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord.*

Our text presents a nuanced lesson on grace and mercy. Before looking at the strands, take note of the way we mix grace and mercy. Although both concepts are anchored in the love of God, and we use the words interchangeably, they are quite different.

Grace is the unmerited favor of God. It is God giving us a gift we do not deserve. Mercy is an act of God where punishment is withheld or an oppressive condition is relieved.

A word often translated as *merciful* is *rachum*, which encompasses compassion, mercy and forgiveness. A word regularly expressing *gracious* is *hanun*, originating from the same root as *hanan*.² The contrast emerges in texts like

*The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.*³

Mercy may entail forgiveness. It may be extended without solicitation, knowledge or consent. It may not be accompanied by apology, remorse, or reform. It is not subject to the will or action of the recipient, for God will have mercy on whom God will have mercy.⁴ It does not matter how much you clap or shout. God may inhabit your praise while denying you mercy. We do not control God!

In the Hannah cycle of Chapters 1 and 2. God had mercy on Hannah as she was taunted by her husband's other wife, Peninnah. However, following the birth of Samuel, the prophet, Hannah, whose name shares a root with the Hebrew word often translated as grace, was blessed with additional children. As Hannah prayed, the priest, Eli, mistakes her for a drunkard. Hannah

² <https://firmisrael.org/learn/definition-of-grace-and-hebrew-meaning-of-favor/#:~:text=The%20Mercy%20and%20Grace%20of%20God&text=The%20word%20for%20merciful%20here,Adonai%2C%20rachum%20v%27hanun...>

³ Psalm 145:8-9

⁴ Exodus 33:19

had done no wrong, but was victimized by her social connections. She was positioned to pray for herself. The priest was unable to address the pain and persecution of the childless Hannah, except to pray that God would grant her the fulfillment of her prayers. With mercy, God intervened.

By grace, God enabled Hannah to give up Samuel to the service of God, and by grace, Samuel grew in the power and favor of God. Hannah's predicament stands as a foil in contrast to Eli's situation. Eli, the priest at Shiloh, had two sons, Hophni and Phinehas. They had no grace and they would be denied mercy. They had office, no grace.

When the small boy, Samuel, wore the holy garb, with authority; Hophni and Phinehas dressed like holy men, but they lacked holy authority in sacred things. Samuel was not outfitted by Addidas, Reebok or Converse. Hannah made his garment proportional to his size, in the style which communicated his call, anointing and holy capacity. The garb said he was God's. The holy garb reflected boy Samuel's authority. His credential did not come from ordination or a seminary degree. His grace came from God in fulfillment of a dedication covenant.

Hophni and Phineas sinned against God. They were not content with what the *Discipline* prescribed as the priests' share of the offering. They used a large, three-pronged fork; stuck it in the pot for the sacrifices; and, whatever came out they kept.⁵ They collected a pre-offering before the meat shrank and the fat was burned.⁶ God got the lesser quality and quantity because the priest took an unlawful share.

It got worse. Hophni and Phineas were engaged in unsavory relations with some of the women who served on the usher board. The Bible does not give the specifics, but we can assume

⁵ This was in violation of what the priest was supposed to receive: often just the breast (High Priest) or the right foreleg.

⁶ Another disregard of the regulations.

they used their lofty, holy position to mislead these faithful women. There was no devotional value in their intimacy. Pure selfishness and lust subverted any chance that they were engaged in a cultic ritual. O, my sisters and brothers, it does not say that any of these women filed charges, but it does say the lay folk went to Eli to complain.

Bishop Eli was not clearly a participant in all of the wrongdoing, though he may have benefited from some of the misappropriated meat. His confrontation of his sons, followed by his inaction, revealed his sin: **seeing and doing nothing.**

Ironically, the wisdom he had for Hophni and Phineas, he ignored for himself. Have you ever been in a position when you could not pray for yourself because you knew you had broken covenant? No one could plead for justice, because there was no way to explain your condition except, “wrong, wrong, wrong.”

Certainly, ALL sin is against God.⁷ Eli, Hophni and Phineas sinned against God. Taking the best portions of what the people bring to God is a sin against God. Minimizing the mission to serve God and people is a sin against God. Prostituting God’s children is a sin against God. ***Failing to keep holiness and order in the house of God, is a sin against God.***

Who can plead their cause...or ours?

When the covenant of faithfulness is broken, we lose our standing to plead or intercede in the name of justice. Positioned as sinners against God, who will intercede for us? Justice, for which we may cry, has already come to a clear conclusion: we deserve judgement. It is only mercy, which suits our case. We must wait on the intervention of mercy in these ways.

⁷ Psalm 51:4 (NRSVue) *Against you, you alone, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.*

FIRST, RESPECT THE HOLINESS OF GOD, GOD'S PEOPLE AND GOD'S OFFERINGS

We cannot play with God's holiness. I don't understand how preachers go into a holy place with play clothes on. You think you are impressing your young folk, but young folk do not need us to look like we are on their level. They want us to hear their voices from their level. They want us to try to understand the challenges on their level. Then, they reach for a word which comes with authority, saying we hear and there is a message of wisdom, hope and power from God.

You may need mercy, if Jesus sends stewards to read Nike and Rebook written on you, and tells them, "Render unto Nike and Reebok that which belongs to them, and unto God that which belongs to God." Wrap yourself in that which says holiness to our God.

We must also respect God's people in and out of the church. Be careful how we speak to them. Be careful about how we speak about them.

Be careful how you manage what the people bring to God as holy gifts. We say, "We give Thee but Thine own, whate'er the gift may be, All that we have is Thine alone, a trust, O Lord from Thee." Do we believe it? What are we doing with the "trust of God?" Are we good stewards?

We have to respect God's holiness and God's people. Isaiah came before God as a man with unclean lips. He recognized his unreadiness to speak before God or the people. It was God who ordered the burning coal. The Spirit cleansed the vessel for the holy task. We, too, need to respect the holy. Let us display fire purified holiness and not play in the holy spaces of God.

SECOND, DON'T ASSUME GRACE COVERS YOUR NEED FOR MERCY

Some of us think that just because we got grace, that we got mercy. Not necessarily so. By grace, Moses looked from a high place and saw the promised, but there was no mercy to carry him over the Jordan, into the Promised Land. Saul had grace as he ascended to the throne, but

he was denied mercy to extend either life or reign. David rose to power by grace, but he was denied mercy at the birth of Bathsheba's first child. Paul received grace. It saved his soul, but there was no mercy to remove the thorn in his side; only grace sufficient for him to endure. Some of us think because God has been good to us, we have a pass card which allows unrighteousness.

I have no doubt that many of us have received grace, but I sometimes wonder about the mercy. Too many pre-grace ways. Too many pre-grace attitudes. Too many pre-grace perspectives. It says maybe the Lord has been good to you, but you have not been delivered from the power of sin. Grace blessed you! However, it has not blessed you with a change because you did not, yet, receive mercy.

Sometimes we are critical of our evangelical brothers and sister, as is justified from time to time. Note their challenge. They think grace received substitutes for the mercy they need as a result of the foolishness they sometimes preach and teach. Some of the foolishness we preach and teach make me wonder about mercy in our life.

Before we judge what certain people like; who they like, and; who they want to marry; we should ask "is that not a child of God?" We may not agree, or share in various habits, but we should be careful how we treat others. We must take care in how we dismiss them, cut them off, or demonize them. They are God's children. Mistreatment is a sin against God.

THIRD, MAKE GOD'S MERCY A PRIORITY IN YOUR LIFE.

Mercy was Hannah's relief from persecution. Mercy, denied, allowed the death of Eli, his sons, and his grandson (Ichabod⁸) whose name echoed the judgement of God...Yes, Bishop

⁸ 1 Samuel 4:21-22 (NRSVue) ²¹ She named the child Ichabod, meaning, "The glory has departed from Israel," because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and

Kirkland! We heard your sermon before the Council of Bishops. *Ichabod* illustrated the departure of God's spirit from Israel. **If the God who made us great holds back the hand of mercy, our gold becomes dust, and our tabernacles will become rubble.**

Make mercy important in your life. Not only the mercy we practice, but the mercy we need from God. During the *Decalogue* put umph when we say, "Lord, have mercy upon us, and write these laws upon our hearts." "At cemetery, look beyond the grave to the Almighty as you pray, "Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy." When you come the table, expose the altar of your heart. Rely on the mercy of God. Call on Christ, the High Priest. He is holy. He is worthy. Lord, have mercy. Pardon and deliver us. Have mercy, not for my sake, but for Jesus' sake! Have mercy, Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.

"The dying thief rejoiced to see, that fountain in his day; and there, may I, though vile as he; wash all my sin away."⁹

Come, ye disconsolate. Come to the mercy seat. Here bring your sinful, wounded hearts. Bring your anger and anxiety. Bring your broken promises and bent covenants. Bring your confession and contrition. Bring your doubts and disappointments. Bring your egos and expectations. Bring your fears and frustrations. Let mercy fall on you. Earth has no sorrows that heaven cannot heal.¹⁰ AMEN! AMEN! AMEN!

her husband.²² She said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."

⁹ From the hymn, *There is a Fountain Filled with Blood*.

¹⁰ Expansion on the hymn, *Come, Ye Disconsolate*."