

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, February 23, 2014**

THE CHARACTER OF MERCY

Genesis 3:1-24

The verse at the top of the Bulletin today, “The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them,” might seem like an odd verse to put on the top of the Bulletin. You might be thinking to yourself, “So we’re going to talk about starting a clothes closet for the community today?” Maybe. No telling exactly what way this might work in terms of your response to it. What we’re going to talk about, though, is not anything quite so narrow. What I’d like for us to do is take a look – a fresh look, hopefully – at this story and discern through it why mercy is necessary even as we examine the character of mercy, a character that is not based on feelings of pity that we might have for the less fortunate but rather is based on what God has done for us.

Let’s start with this: The reason that mercy is necessary. Neil has been preaching for the last several weeks from a variety of passages that all have led back ultimately to Micah chapter 6, verse 8 and the prophet’s call to love God, to walk humbly with Him, to love justice and to love mercy. What is mercy and why is it necessary? This chapter offers us the reason why mercy is necessary. The fall of Adam and Eve into sin was not simply an isolated act, rather, it was an act with consequences for all of humanity, for all of the multitude of people who would follow them. In Adam’s sin all of us fell. In Adam’s sin all of us inherited a sinful nature. And because of that there are at least four ways in which that has manifested itself among us and I’d like for you to ponder on those for just a moment. There are four different forms of alienation.

Perhaps the most important thing that sin has resulted in is alienation from God. We’ve been separated from Him. And because we’ve been separated from Him, everything that we think of in regard to God, everything that we do with regard to God is distorted. For instance, there are those who think that because they believe in God, because they have faith in God, that gives them license to use violence to bring their faith to other people. There are cultists who think that *they* are at the center of their faith, of their religion, rather than God and that indeed the people who follow them have no business even living in the world if they’re not part of it. There are those who think that race is God and that because they have white skin or black skin or yellow skin or red skin or whatever racial characteristic they choose to point to, they think that that is what connects them to God. Some are even more explicit about that. “The White Man’s Bible?” That’s no Bible. I don’t even know what the content of that is, but it’s no Bible. It’s certainly nothing that bears any resemblance whatever to the Jewish and Christian Scriptures embodied in the Old and New Testaments. Other people go a different way and they simply make it up as they go along. Wicca, Hinduism, Buddhism, various forms of man-made religion that essentially say that because we’re separated from God we have to do it ourselves, we have to make it up as we go along. We de-personalize God. We identify Him with the universe as a whole or we even identify Him with ourselves. All of that stems from Adam and Eve.

Our alienation goes beyond that to alienation from ourselves. It results in the disintegration of our personalities and all kinds of destructive behavior, from depression to grief to fear; to alcoholism and drug abuse; to physical abuse and even suicide. We're not only alienated from God because of what Adam and Eve did, we're alienated from ourselves. We can't know who we truly are or what our purpose in the world truly is if we don't know Him. And because we don't know Him, we don't know ourselves.

And that, in turn, means we're alienated from others. I don't know about you. That is not a healthy relationship (referring to slide). But they're not alone. Loneliness, marital strife, greed, anger, violence. Just this week, this is the picture of the week from Kiev as people fought in the streets, fought because they could not hear one another, because they could not understand one another. Fought because some sought to oppress others. All of this stems from Adam and Eve. All of this comes from that first sin. It's incredible to think that such a simple act has resulted in so much carnage.

Because we're alienated from God and alienated from ourselves and therefore alienated from others, eventually there are effects even beyond the human world. We end up alienated from nature. The natural world has been afflicted by the effects of our sin and our relationship with that world has been damaged even to the point of bringing death and disease and scourges to our existence. India, after Bhopal. China, the world's most polluted country. Aging. Adam lived over 900 years. We count ourselves extraordinarily blessed if we live to 80 or 90. Children die in childhood all over the world, by the tens of thousands every week. We ourselves have to deal with illness and with death. Our sin has seen the creation of a host of human needs that would otherwise have been filled by God or not necessary at all. The truth of what we see in Genesis 3 is a people coming from Adam and coming from Eve with a dire, with an overwhelming, with an existential need to reconnect with our Creator and for forgiveness from Him.

I don't know what the particular consequences are for you. One thing I want to make clear is that while all of the effects that I just went through ultimately have their foundation in sin, I'm not suggesting that for instance a person who's depressed is depressed because they've sinned. It's because they live in a fallen world, and because they live in a fallen world therefore this is one of the effects that manifests itself in their lives, in their minds, in their hearts. And I don't know for each of you what the particular manifestations are. Those are going to differ from one person to another. But some of the needs are quite consistent from one individual to another. All of us have a need for internal peace, for understanding both of ourselves and the world around us, a sense of satisfaction and achievement, that we're accomplishing something in the world. All of us have a need for hope. All of us need to be able to look at the future not as something oppressive or bleak but rather as something good and to be embraced. All of us have a need for joy. All of us have the need to be able to rejoice in the life that we live, in the world that we live in, in the things that we do, in the people that we know, and most of all in the God who loves us and gives us all things.

We have needs for love and for companionship. It doesn't matter whether we get married or not. One of the great heresies of the modern world is that you can't be genuinely

loved or you can't find genuine companionship unless you're married. Not true. That can be found in a whole host of relationships, but there are some who never experience it at all. All of us have a need to be accepted by others, accepted for who we are and what we are. All of us have a need for forgiveness from others because all of us at one point or another have trampled on someone else. All of us have manifested the effects of that first sin, which puts us at the center of our world so that our needs and our desires are more important than anyone else's. All of us have done that and because all of us have done that all of us have that need for forgiveness. All of us have a need to be free from hatred and prejudice. All of us have a need to be free to give of ourselves. Another way to say that is not only do we need to be loved but we have a need to love. All of us have a need for health and wholeness, harmony with our natural environment and life eternal in a renewed creation. All of us have that need. Many people don't recognize that they have all of those needs, but they do.

I would ask you to go to anyone whom you know – atheist, Christian, member of a different religion – and go down this list of needs and find out which ones they don't have. That is where you find their self-delusion. That's where you find that they don't understand themselves or human nature. One example: How many of you remember a Simon and Garfunkle song from the 1960s called *I Am A Rock*? For those of you who don't know it, I'll sing it for you. At which point alienation from others will blossom throughout this room. No, I'm not going to sing it, but most of you remember that song and Paul Simon's lyrics to the effect that he was a rock, he didn't need other people. As a matter of fact, he didn't want other people. As a matter of fact he said that a rock never cries, a rock is never hurt, a rock never feels pain. Isn't that a marvelous thing? Well, yes, it would be nice if we didn't have to deal with the effects of sin in our relationships. But if we avoid the possibility of experiencing the effects of sin in our relationships, we also find ourselves depriving ourselves of what we desperately need. And of course those of you who remember that song will remember that the way Simon sings that song, he doesn't believe a word of it. He knows what he needs and he knows that as long as he closes himself off he's never going to get it. And that's the case with all of these needs. First and foremost, there is the need to reconnect with our Creator and receive forgiveness from Him. As long as we deny that we need that there is always going to be a hole in our lives. And it's a hole that we will quite readily fill up with something else, whether it's politics or wealth or hatred or any of seven dozen other things. There will always be something that fills that hole. Inasmuch as we fail to find a way to meet the other needs that I've mentioned, from understanding to companionship to self-giving to health – inasmuch as we fail to deal with those needs we'll also try to fill those holes with something else.

Now what does all of this have to do with mercy? Well, the mercy that Genesis 3 depicts is the mercy of a God who has been disobeyed, whose Word has been ignored, but who nevertheless gives to His creation, His creatures, to Adam and Eve, the means to deal with the fallen world that they have created. That's why verse 21 is in some ways at the heart of this passage. We all know this story. Adam and Eve took of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil when they were told not to. The result was punishment for the serpent who was essentially turned into a snake to crawl on his belly for all of his life.

The woman was given the unfortunate punishment of being required to experience pain in childhood and, while I've obviously never gone through that, my suspicion is that no matter how much we try to dull that pain, no matter how much women try to avoid that pain, one way or another it's still experienced. Am I right? And Adam is told he's going to work, and that doesn't sound so bad until you look at the way that work is going to be done. Cursed is the ground because of you and you're going to have to till that ground and you're going to have to make your livelihood from that ground and you're going to have to eat from that ground. That doesn't sound like the kind of work I'd like to do, even if I was really big on horticulture. I still wouldn't want to do that on cursed ground.

So there are consequences to their sin and they are then sent out from the Garden of Eden. But even in their exile, God has mercy on them. He makes skins for Adam and Eve to clothe their nakedness, but He doesn't do so out of necessity. There is nothing that says He had to do that for them. What they deserved would be banishment and take your chances. But instead, He makes garments for them specifically because they had mentioned their nakedness. It wasn't just that it would be cold out there. This is the Middle East, how cold can it get? It wasn't just because it was going to be hot out there. It wasn't just because they needed something that would protect their skin from the burning rays of the sun. They had specifically mentioned nakedness. When God asks Adam where he was, in verse 9, Adam's reply in verse 10 was, "I heard you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked." He was afraid because he knew what God's response to that would be. He doesn't say he's embarrassed or humiliated. He's afraid. Of course God immediately knows what happened, knew what had happened even before He posed the question. Adam had eaten of the tree of knowledge and so when it came time to execute judgment He did so tempered with the mercy of giving them garments that would reduce their need to be afraid. To be naked in this world is a fearful condition and He would do for them what they could not do for themselves. There was nothing that they could do, nothing that they did, nothing they could say to cause God to be merciful to them. The essence of mercy is that it is not deserved. The punishment that they received – pain in childbirth, working a cursed ground – that is what they deserved. Skins, on the other hand, was not what they deserved. That was an act of mercy.

When we forgive someone who's harmed us, do we do that because they deserve to be forgiven? I hope not. I hope that we forgive those who don't deserve to be forgiven. Specifically because forgiveness is not something that can be earned. It's only something that can be freely given as a gift. Paul makes this clear when he writes in Romans 5:8 that, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." While we were yet sinners, Christ made possible the way of forgiveness and in fact brought forgiveness to His people. When they didn't deserve it.

So that's the first element when we talk about the character of mercy. We talk about mercy that is modeled on God's version of it. That's the first element of it, that it's undeserved. The second is that it meets out needs. Adam and Eve were cast into the cold, cruel world and they would be very, very needy people. And God's provision for them is symbolized by the skins that He makes for them and that's a provision that

extends to all their material needs. You'll notice that when He said cursed is the ground, He didn't say therefore you're going to have to eat animals because the ground is not going to grow anything. The ground would still grow. It would be a hard slog. But it would still produce fruit and that fruit would keep them going.

He takes care of them and in the same way He takes care of all of His people. As a matter of fact, He takes care of all people, regardless of whether they are His or not. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount that the rain falls on the just and the unjust. The rain falls on God's people and those who reject God. So His provision, His mercy for a fallen world is to meet its needs. That is why the team went to Brooklyn. I'm not disputing any of the stuff Jon said. That is all absolutely true. But the reason, the fundamental reason why the team went to Brooklyn, is because God gave Adam and Eve garments to deal with their nakedness when they did not deserve that. So Jon and the rest of the folks went up to Brooklyn despite the fact that there was nothing Ms. Kelly could have done that would've made her deserve what they did. They didn't even know her. They had no connection with her whatsoever. And yet they did that anyway – gave four days, gave the sweat of their brow, gave their tools and materials because God had first done that for them. You remember what John, in his first letter, says about God's love for us: "This is love. Not that we loved Him but that He loved us (1 John 4:10). And we love Him because of that. We returned that. And in the same way mercy which we give to our neighbors whether they're in Brooklyn or in Kingstowne or Kenya or wherever they may be, the reason that we give that love and that mercy to our neighbors is not because we are wonderful people who are just overflowing with the milk of human kindness. It was because God has acted in our lives, given to us what we could never give, met the needs that our fallen world has created within us and in turn has called upon us to turn around and do the same for the one standing next to you, wherever they may be.