

Reduced to Mercy

Kenn Gulliksen, my original pastor and founder of the Vineyard, once said: 'When you've lost mercy, you've lost your calling as a Christian.' He's right. I tend to assess 'mercy' levels in my heart as a gauge of how I am doing as a Christian.

And God is always faithful to reduce me to mercy when I have majored on other things. He does this through suffering, through the slow boil of real life that tends to burn off extraneous things and distill what matters.

In cooking terms, a 'reduction' involves the intensifying or thickening of a liquid mixture through boiling it. Some things evaporate, thus concentrating the flavor.

I won't bore you with details on my 'boiling points'; we all have them, and they either reduce us to the flavor of Jesus or burn up what is good until all that remains is a bitter, proud survivor. Hurling oneself through hell into a self-generated resurrection does not interest me!

Survival of the fittest offers no hope for the weak. The survivalist can only advise: 'Unless you get tough like me, you will perish.' That's a gospel of a different sort. I reject self-reliance on the basis of Mercy.

Mercy is God's heart.

Why else would He pour out His very essence into a young Jewish girl and manifest Himself as a baby? Helpless and naked, God became the most dependent of mammals, subject to despots and debasement of all sorts. He reduced Himself for us in order to show us the little way of Mercy.

He invites us to celebrate our smallness. Humbled by our own helplessness, we worship the Child-King and entrust ourselves to the power reduced into His tiny frame.

Madeline L'Engle says it like this: 'Power. Greater power than we can imagine, abandoned, as the Word knew the powerlessness of the unborn child, still unformed, taking up almost no space in the great ocean of amniotic fluid, unseeing, unhearing, unknowing. Slowly growing as any human

embryo grows, arms and legs and a head, eyes, mouth, nose, slowly swimming into life until the ocean in the womb is no longer large enough and it is time for birth.

Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, Christ, the Maker of the universe, willingly and lovingly leaving all that power and coming to this poor, sin-filled planet to live with us for a few years to show us what we ought to be and could be...to show us what it means to be made in God's image.'

He invites us to marvel at His Mercy. God reduced to an infant is the essence of Divine Mercy. One Hebrew word for mercy is 'hesed', or 'unfailing love'; it conveys an objective, rather masculine mercy from the God who keeps His covenant with us, even when we disobey Him. Another Hebrew word for mercy is 'rachamin', and is feminine, rooted in 'a mother's womb'. 'Rachamin' is the mercy God feels for His afflicted ones the way a mother aches for her wayward child.

Baby Jesus is the fruit of God's strong and objective yet deeply caring mercy for us. Jesus is a reduction, a distillation of His all-consuming passion to manifest His love for us.

Similarly, our good and wise God will employ hard things in our lives to reduce us to Himself. He is intent on our becoming like Himself, through the gift of Himself. He may just use suffering to get us there.

Alluding to Simeon's prophecy about the Virgin Mary ('and a sword shall pierce your heart'), Christoph Schonburg writes: 'Mary triumphs through the sword in her heart, not in her hand.' Similarly, as Christ-bearers, in the spirit of Mary, we are not exempt from the sword that reduces us to Mercy.

Over the last year, I have been pierced in ways that have caused me to cast myself on Him as never before. My prayer: 'Let Mercy triumph over my judgments!'

Annette and I were sharing with our dear friends, Mike and Diane Nobrega, about our boiling points. Diane wisely responded: 'God's Mercy is being distilled in you and Desert Stream. What seems like loss is Him intensifying the anointing.'

"Remember that old praise song, with a chorus that goes: Jesus, reduce me to love?" she said, warbling her version of the song 'Charity'.

You bet we do! 'Charity' was the one big fat hit that our pastor Kenn Gulliksen wrote and recorded in the seventies. Stumbling through the lyrics, we four called Kenn via speaker phone and requested some help. He gave us a brave solo version of his one claim to pop fame.

He sang 'Jesus, reduce me to love' in a voice trembling from years of piercings and unexpected mercies. Having lived the lyrics, he made it easy to receive them.

May Jesus reduce you to love this Christmas. He reduced Himself to Mercy that we too might be reduced to little else—flavorful, intense, generous Mercy.