

Mercy! Power, pity and pleas of the public



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

We hear it a lot. A common expression; a social convention: "Mercy." When I think of the word I hear the voice of Marvin Gaye: "Mercy, mercy me" – a lyrical request for relief, or belief that what we see or feel will be alleviated by something, someone. Most often we may hear an exclamation of "Mercy!" as a startled response, a painful moment or a cry for help.

It isn't merciless to question why we use this word in common speech.

In courtrooms, a defendant may throw themselves on "the mercy of the court," asking the judge to show leniency, to consider human frailties and flaws when rendering judgment. Is this one origin for the use of the term "mercy"? In a kingly court, an individual can beseech the king, begging for special consideration.

In the cosmic courtroom, a guilty human being throws themselves to the ground and pleads for mercy from the divine judge. The stakes are higher of course. This judge doesn't merely have the power and authority to send a person to a cold jail cell, but to a fiery prison for eternity. Mercy.

Carol and I went to hear our nephew sing with his high school chorus. We enjoyed the lively performance, impressed by the ethnic diversity of students, faculty and parents. Several selections were somewhat surprising for a public school. One song was a slow "Hear Our Prayer" and another featured a soloist singing emotionally about her "soul." I whispered to Carol that it was feeling like a church service with the gymnasium transformed into a sanctuary. Though I certainly have concerns about church-state issues, in this case I didn't have serious problems with my nephew singing these songs.

Introducing one piece, the director explained they would be singing "Kyrie" and said it was about the Lord. Brought up in the church and serving as a minister for years, I was very familiar with the song: "Lord, have mercy ... Christ have mercy." I had to wonder how that was chosen for this concert, but it was a beautiful number.

We ought to know what we mean when we say "mercy." From Old French and Latin for "pity, favor" or "heavenly reward," the first definition is: "compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm." There is a power dimension. One is pitifully "at the mercy" of another who can exercise great power

over them. Consider the famous line from the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall find mercy." There is, perhaps, an implication that if you show some mercy, you'll get some back. Not sure how often that works in life, but at least it encourages compassion toward others (if only to receive it yourself). In Christian tradition this practice is closely related to another emotional concept: "grace." In some churches we hear the clergy declaring: "Grace, mercy and peace be with you." Contemplating the meaning of grace does seem relevant in this context since it raises the issue of power again – seeking the favor or approval of the All-Powerful, though it may be undeserved favor in the face of God's disapproval of who we are and what we do. Gracious!, we may say. To an earthly or heavenly potentate we might plead: "Have mercy, your Grace!" Seeking to stay in the king's "good graces" is related to being treated with mercy – you don't have to fear punishment if you have his royal favor. A big IF.

The humanitarian organization, "Mercy Corps," centers their mission on a "steadfast belief that the communities we serve are the best agents of their own change." We might assume that Mercy Corps is guided by the old adage: helping others to help themselves, focusing on empowering others, or assisting them to draw upon their own power. In this case, being merciful (compassionately applying power) so "Everyone can prosper." This seems admirable, a creative use of the term "mercy."

French-speaking people say "merci" – "thank you." "Merci beaucoup": "thank you very much." To be merciful or mercy-full is related to being thankful, grateful. The French philosopher Voltaire wrote in response to his fellow countryman Pascal: "Why make us feel disgusted with our being? Our existence is not so wretched as we are led to believe." Voltaire appreciated another French thinker, Montaigne, who wrote: "I accept with all my heart and with gratitude what nature has done for me" (quotes from "How to Live: A Life of Montaigne").

Gracious! Mercy! When we hear or use these expressions out of excitement or exasperation, it may be reasonable to imagine, not that we are at the mercy of a powerful overseer, but that we have the natural power within us for compassion and change.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (chighland.com).