

Blogging Toward Wednesday: How I learned to love mercy

By [Nanette Sawyer](#)

February 12, 2015

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Sawyer's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

In my younger, decidedly anti-Christian days, I did not like the way Christians asked God for mercy. It reinforced my idea that “the Christian God” was cruel and punishing. After all, if God was a loving and compassionate God, one would not have to beg for mercy. And if God was cruel and punishing but at the same time righteous and just, then human beings were clearly bad and unworthy.

This whole system of thought—shameful people and cruel God—made me want to stay far, far away from Christianity and Christian churches. The whole thing seemed toxic and damaging, delivering the bad news of religious shame and manipulation rather than the good news of God’s grace and love showered on a world in need.

Since then, my understanding of mercy has been completely turned upside down.

I think the keys that have unlocked mercy for me have been love and self-respect. The church of my childhood was much better at teaching about shame and fear than about “Jesus loves the little children.” We did sing that song, of course, but where was it lived out?

I have one good childhood memory from that church. It was when the pastor’s wife had the children of the church over to their house to bake cookies. I felt that she liked me and the other children. It felt special to get to make and eat those cookies. There was a little bit of love there. But in general, the lasting message I received from that church was about shame and not being good enough—not being good at all, in fact.

After many years of healing, self-respect has made it possible for me to receive forgiveness. The church of my childhood planted the idea of utter brokenness at the core of my being, and I could not overcome it for years and years. I couldn't overcome it at all within the context that damaged me. I had to leave the church to re-establish a basic core of self-respect.

Once I knew that there is some fundamental goodness in me, that I am in fact lovable, that the image of God in me is real, then I was able to recognize my failures as well. Recognizing my failures and feeling lovable at the same time made redemption possible for me. Even though I make mistakes, God actually, really and truly, loves me. And forgives me right now, exactly as I am. God keeps calling me closer to God and closer to God's vision for me.

But the love of God is not potential love for some future time when I am different. God's love is for right now.

That's mercy: love that is not deterred by my failures and limitations. Mercy pours into my scorched heart and washes my fearful thoughts and heals my shame like a soothing balm on torn skin. Mercy loves and is tender and compassionate. Mercy heals.