

The meaning of mercy: Luke 10:25-37

by [Jennifer L. Lord](#) in the [June 29, 2010](#) issue

When a lawyer asks Jesus about eternal life, Jesus turns the question back to the lawyer, and the lawyer answers, citing scripture (Deuteronomy and Leviticus). The lawyer circles around one more time, this time asking a question with a history of interpretation: who is one's neighbor? Jesus responds by telling the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus describes a man who's been stripped and beaten and left for dead; he names two men who pass by on the other side of the road as a priest and a Levite, and he names the rescuer as a Samaritan.

Then Jesus turns to the lawyer and asks him, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" When it's the lawyer's turn to speak, the name of the one who's become the focus of the story isn't on his lips. Jesus has named the Good Samaritan as the main character, but the lawyer doesn't say, "the Samaritan." Perhaps it's because the lawyer doesn't want to have the word in his mouth. After all, for the Jews the Samaritans were the unclean ones from the north.

Instead the lawyer answers, "The one who showed him mercy." That answer cannot be all bad, for Jesus' response is "Go and do likewise." There is a tidiness between the original question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" and the directive, "Go and do likewise." In the end the answer is about mercy.

Some have called this story the parable of the merciful Samaritan. Mercy is different from goodness. The Samaritan who acted with mercy is a depiction, an example of mercy. The word *eleos* implies something broader than the juridical sense we often bring to the concept of mercy, and it means something more than forgiving a debt or an offense. *Eleos* suggests blessing and unwarranted compassion as well as leniency. It is about pardon, kindness, strength and even rescue and generosity. It is a word that can hold a lot.

It is a word at the heart of many prayers. *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.* These are the words of the ancient Jesus Prayer, prayed in silence, prayed with the rhythm of breathing or prayed aloud as a mantra with others. *Have*

*mercy*, say congregants who pray intercessions. In one of these prayers, listed in my Protestant service book as based on the Eastern liturgies of St. Basil and St. John Chrysostom, the response comes 14 times: *Lord have mercy*. There are petitions for peace, for salvation, unity, church leaders and all the people, for all nations and all cities, for good weather and abundant crops, for travelers, the sick, the suffering and those in captivity. After each petition, all respond *Lord have mercy*. Mercy is at the heart of the church's prayers. Mercy is our intercession before God when we call upon God's covenant loyalty, God's faithfulness, God's steadfast love.

I asked a priest in the Eastern Orthodox Church, "When is *Lord have mercy* said the most? What one service or combination of services on any given day or feast day would have the most repetitions of *Lord have mercy*?" I know there are many repetitions of this response. Some prayer litanies have triads of this mercy response. Some have tenfold groupings. Some have 40-fold groupings. Sometimes there is one service (Divine Liturgy), and sometimes the hours are prayed in addition to the liturgy. The priest said the answer was obvious from the Slavic tradition of the church: the vigil for the elevation of the cross (with the litya and rite of elevation) on the eve of September 14. That liturgy had the most repetitions of *Lord have mercy*. How many times? Six hundred thirty-six times.

That's an abundance of mercy speech.

I believe that what we pray gets into our bones. Time after time, Sunday after Sunday, litany after litany, prayer after prayer: *Lord have mercy* gets into our bones. *Have mercy on us, O God* gets inside of us. Standing alongside family and friends and strangers petitioning God and calling down God's mercy, we begin to see ourselves linked as the mercy-needing ones. All of us with our hard lives. All of us with sins and regrets. All of us in need of strength and blessing and rescue. All of us at the hands of robbers, and as the robbers. All of us on the road. All of us who have had wine and oil poured on our wounds. All of us made neighbors in Jesus Christ. *Have mercy, O God. Make us merciful. Make us mercy bearers. Make us bear the fruit of mercy. Make us more than good, make us merciful. Beyond bloodlines and country and creed: make us mercy to all we meet.*