The Quality of Mercy  
A Sermon by Rev. Wayne B. Arnason  
*Sunday, March 7, 2010*  

West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church,  
Rocky River, Ohio  

Featuring the Songs and Poetry of  
Leonard Cohen

**Sermon - Part 1**  
If there is a Psalm writer alive today, who can channel the voice of that ancient singer/songwriter of the Biblical Psalms, King David, then surely it must be Leonard Cohen. When I started to think about where I would find the readings and songs to begin a month of Sundays that would explore the meanings of mercy as a religious value and discipline, I thought first about the Psalms, and then I thought about Cohen. Watching KD Laing perform the song we just heard the Choir offer, Hallelujah, as the finale to the Opening Ceremony of the Olympics sealed the deal for me. Cohen is a Canadian, of course – that's at least fifty per cent of what got his song that slot in the Opening Ceremony – but he is also a profoundly religious artist. He grew up as a Jew in Roman Catholic Montreal and he has called himself an atheist and a hedonist and he has also been a Zen Buddhist monk who has retreated into a monastery for ten years of his life. No wonder he intrigues me. But he always has. Despite the fact that we saw Cohen perform for the first time just this fall, I was seventeen years old when I bought his first published book of poetry, a book called *Let us Compare Mythologies*. So he’s been speaking to me for a long time.

The song, *Hallelujah*, is Cohen’s most direct reference to and response to the Psalms, but I don’t just see Leonard Cohen as a responder to the Psalms, but as a contemporary Psalm writer himself. To be able to appreciate why, you have to know something about the Psalms, and not many Unitarian Universalists do. They are not the most accessible parts of the Bible for people who hold the Bible at arms length – and I wouldn’t know much about them except for Kathleen Rolenz, who uses them often as a guide to her morning meditation. The Psalms are a striking collection of 150 song poems composed by many Hebrew authors, most famously King David, over a thousand year period prior to the common era. Kathleen Norris has described them as “blessedly untidy” because they offer us a “genuine continuity with our human past… as ancient as they are The Psalms reflect our world as it is, full of violence, greed, betrayal…The wide range of expression in the Psalter – the anger and pain of lament, the anguished self-probing of confession, the grateful fervor of thanksgiving, the ecstatic joy of praise – allows us to bring our whole lives before God”, says Norris. ¹ I find this same range of expression and this same invitation in the work of Leonard Cohen.

For me some of the most powerful Psalms are the Psalms of lamentation, those that cry out to God for Mercy, Psalms like the 56th that we heard read earlier, or like 22nd Psalm which begins with the words “My God, Why have you forsaken me?” which will be the text for the second sermon in this series at the end of March. The most popularly known and quoted Psalms are the thanksgiving and praise psalms, those that find in God a comfort and a strength, like the 23rd. But the lamentation Psalms asking for mercy are ones I’ve always come back to. They are not prayers for pity, these Psalms. Often they are filled with a combination of outrage and sarcasm and surrender in their petition to God for Mercy. Cohen sums them up for me in his poem: “Argument”:

“You might be a person who likes to argue with Eternity. A good way to begin such an argument is this:

*Why do you rule against me? Why do you silence me now?*

*When will the Truth be on my lips, and the Light be on my brow?*

After some time has passed, the answer to these questions percolating upwards from the pit of your stomach, or downwards from the crown of your hat, or having been given, at last, the right pill, you might begin to fall in love with the One who asked them;

and perhaps then you will cry out, as so many of our parents did:

¹ Kathleen Norris, *This Present darkness: a spiritual journey into the heart of the 21st century*.
Blessed be the One who has sweetened my Argument.

So what does “Mercy” mean to us as a religious practice and religious value? Why do we pair it with Forgiveness as the worship theme for this month? The story of how that came to be in interesting in and of itself. In our original outline for three years of monthly worship on the great themes of religious life, we originally were going to title this month’s theme: “Sin”.

When we brought the outline to the Worship Associates team for that year, they rose up in protest. “Unitarian Universalists don’t believe in Sin”, they said. “Can’t we find a way to go at this which is more true to who we are and more positive??”

So we came up with Forgiveness and Mercy instead, presumably the most positive response to Sin that we could imagine. This story reminds us of how Mercy is usually understood theologically and how we usually hear the word used in our world today. Mercy is something that is bestowed by an all-powerful judge on someone less powerful that is under the judge’s control. The person under the judge’s control may be convicted of a crime, and it is up to the judge to pronounce punishment. The judge may not actually be a judge in a court of law, but a powerful person that can control whether another person will live or die, say a soldier victorious in a battle, or a person of wealth who controls resources that can make or break another’s livelihood. We mostly use the word “mercy” in our common parlance today to describe what happens when that powerful person is lenient in the way that they use their power in response to another’s suffering. So a judge in a court of law shows “mercy” when he or she takes into account circumstances that suggest a lesser sentence than the maximum possible for a convicted criminal’s offense. A soldier on the battlefield shows mercy when he or she decides to let a vanquished enemy live rather than die. A person of wealth who controls capital shows mercy when working conditions are maximized while producing reasonable profits and the quality of life for owners and workers is in some balance that takes justice into account. These are the ways we use the word “mercy” in our everyday lives in the 21st century, and these are the very same images with which people both ancient and modern have used when they thought about God.

God for the ancient Israelites and for many other believers in religions around the world has been seen as a Judge, has been seen as a Warrior King, and has been seen as Feudal Lord that controls our lives. When we pray to a God thus conceived for mercy, we are praying therefore for leniency from someone of power who can choose to continue or increase our suffering or relieve it. The Psalms, at times, have all of these images of the Divine imbedded within them.

The Christian theologians of the early church who built upon these Hebrew foundations went a step forward in the way they placed mercy at the forefront of the gifts that God could give us. They believed that the creation story from the Hebrew scriptures meant that we human beings were all born into sin, that from the moment we came out of the womb and cried our protest we were each guilty criminals before an angry divine judge who made the world in which we now found ourselves. They believed we were all born sinners, and required God’s mercy to be saved.

Now this is what the Worship Associates were protesting when they said that Unitarian Universalists don’t believe in Sin, and they were absolutely right. We don’t. The ancient myths of creation from the world’s faith tell us something about how ancient people experienced their world but we don’t believe they necessarily tell us much about why we are here and what our relationship to the entire universe might be. Unitarian Universalists believe that we human beings are born as an original blessing to this world, and not as original sinners.

So if we have no original sin for which we must seek forgiveness, is all this talk about seeking God’s mercy just so much ancient poetry built on a theological understanding that means nothing to us? Ancient poetry it is, but I would say that we miss out on something important if we dismiss the possibility that “sin”, and “forgiveness”, and “mercy” could have meaning for us within the context of living a liberal religious life. Leonard Cohen writes of sin and forgiveness in his poem of lament entitled: “The Goal”

“I can’t leave my house or answer the phone.
I’m going down again, but I’m not alone. 
Settling at last accounts of the soul; 
This for the trash, that paid in full. 
As for the fall, it began long ago: 
Can’t stop the rain, can’t stop the snow. 
I sit in my chair. I look at the street. 
The neighbor returns my smile of defeat. 
I move with the leaves. I shine with the chrome. 
I’m almost alive. I’m almost at home. 
No one to follow and nothing to teach, 
Except that the goal falls short of the reach.”

Over many years and many ministers, I 
know that you have heard from this pulpit before 
that we should understand sin not as an 
existential condition of being alienated from the 
divine that can only be restored by accepting 
Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, but as 
something much more common and 
understandable, as “missing the mark”. Sin is the 
recognition and the acceptance of responsibility 
for the fact that for almost everyone our goal of 
who we want to be and how we want be with 
others in our lives will at times fall short of our 
reach. None of us are as good, as generous, as 
clever, or as wise as we usually think we are, or 
that we often aspire to be. We all struggle with 
our longings, and we all project our pain onto 
other people in many different ways because we 
are tired of bearing it ourself.

Because that is the human condition which 
some choose to call “sin” and load down with all 
sorts of other theological baggage, because the 
goal usually does fall short of the reach, we are 
all people in need of forgiveness and mercy. But 
that mercy does not come in the form of a 
pardon from a sentence. The sentence will not be 
commuted. Leonard Cohen writes:

“My time is running out and still I have not 
sung the true song, the great song. 
I admit that I seem to have lost my courage. 
A glance at the mirror, a glimpse into my 
heart, makes me want to shut up forever. 
So why do you lean me here, Lord of my 
life, 
Lean me at this table, in the middle of night, 
Wondering how to be beautiful.”

We all know we are not here for very 
long and we are all in need of mercy because we 
are all wondering how, in the short time we 
have, we can be beautiful. So where is mercy to 
be found? How do we offer it? How do we 
become and be beautiful? 
Let’s listen to one of Leonard Cohen’s older 
songs for an answer:

Sermon - Part 2
So who are the Sisters of Mercy? Are they nuns 
or are they prostitutes? Are they angels or are 
they members of your family? Are they those 
people you have loved the most in your life or 
are they the many people who love the same 
things that you do? I’ve heard this song each of 
those ways, and as I do I hear a different story in 
the song. But the central meaning remains the 
same to me. The sisters of mercy are waiting for 
us at those times when we’ve thought that we 
just can’t go on. They are not going to be found 
in a prayer or a sermon or a class or an 
achievement. They are going to find us in things 
much earthier, much less esoteric, much more 
everyday.

When I feel like I have missed the mark and 
feel inadequate and disconnected, when I feel 
like my life is a leaf that the seasons tear off and 
condemn, I turn to the body and to the earth. I 
make love, or I shovel the driveway, or I dig in 
the garden. I look for anything that I can wrap 
my hands around that bring me back to the 
beauty that surrounds me – a telescope, a golf 
club, a child, a red pepper and a knife to chop it 
with. I reconnect with what is beautiful that is 
right in front of me, and that loose leaf of my 
life starts to feel held once again by a love that is 
graceful and green as a stem.

I don’t know whether there is a God, but I 
do know that whatever God has meant to human 
beings over thousands of years has been sent and 
mediated and demonstrated and given to us 
through the earth on which we live and the 
human and other sentient beings that share it 
with us. These sisters of mercy that surround us 
every day are not departed or gone, they are 
always there, and they are the way that God acts 
in the world.

If there is a sin that we often commit that we 
constantly need to be forgiven for, it is the sin of 
accepting the loneliness that we feel. For 
whatever God may be in this world, to say that 
God acts through us is also to say that God acts
through you. Yes, you. So if you are in need of forgiveness and mercy, start with yourself. How can you be a creator of mercy rather than just a receiver? At the beginning of the service we invoked the holy with words from William Shakespeare:

“The quality of mercy is not strained. It drops as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath.

It is twice blessed; it blesses him that gives, and him that takes.

Mercy is reciprocal and mutual and blesses both the giver and the receiver. Mercy in its simplest form is the everyday practice of compassion and appreciation for everyone and everything that surrounds us. Mercy is choosing not to leave everything that you cannot control, because what you can control is so small. Mercy is being present to this world and forgiving it for not giving you everything that you want and loving it anyway. If you can forgive the world for not being about you, you will find welling up within you a compassion that will make you a sister of mercy, yourself. Yes, you. One last poem from Leonard Cohen:

“When it all went down, and the pain came through. I get it now, I was there for you. Don’t ask me how, I know it’s true. I get it now, I was there for you. I make my plans like I always do, But when I look back, I was there for you. I walk the streets like I used to do, and I freeze with fear, But I’m there for you. I see my life in full review. It was never me, it was always you. You sent me here, you sent me there Breaking things I can’t repair. Making objects out of thought, Making more by thinking not. Eating food and drinking wine. A body that I thought was mine. Dressed as arab, dressed as jew, O mask of iron. I was there for you. Moods of glory, moods so foul, The world comes through a bloody towel. And death is old, but its always new. I freeze with fear, and I’m there for you. I see it clear, I always knew. It was never me. I was there for you. I was there for you, my darling one. And by your law, it was all done. Don’t ask me how, I know it’s true. I get it now. I was there for you.”

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i The Psalms, with Commentary by Kathleen Norris; Berkeley NY (1997) pp viii-ix.


iii Cohen, ibid. p. 153

iv Cohen, “My Time”, ibid. P.178

v Cohen, “For You”, ibid. p. 201