King James Version
Matthew 5: 1-7
1 And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: 2 And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,

**The Beatitudes**
3 Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. 5 Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. 6 Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. 7 Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

The word of the Lord.

*The quality of mercy is not strained;*
*It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven*
*Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed;*
*It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.*

The beginning of this speech by Portia, the well-known heroine in the play *The Merchant of Venice,* is one of the most recognizable speeches in any play written by Shakespeare. Written between the years 1594 and 1596, *The Merchant of Venice* was created about midway in the span of years while Shakespeare wrote his 37 plays. The play is considered a comedy because it has a happy ending although such a fate does not apply to all the characters. It is of medium length, longer than *Julius Caesar* but shorter than *Romeo and Juliet* or *The Winter’s Tale.* The action takes place in 16th century Venice, a cosmopolitan city known for commerce and wealth, where Jews and Christians conduct business together. The play has a number of timeless themes including love, friendship, prejudice, intolerance, law and revenge. But mercy is the theme I want to address today during this chapel series, “Faith in Shakespeare.”

Before analyzing this famous speech and its message about mercy, a short summary of the central action of the play is in order to understand why these words resonate so strongly in Act IV. Shylock, a Venetian Jew, has loaned money to Antonio, the merchant of Venice, against expectations that Antonio’s investments will eventually prosper. These investments are carried on Antonio’s ships which are expected to return to port from the new world laden with valuable cargo. Shylock asks not for interest on the loan but for a pound of Antonio’s flesh in case he defaults on the debt. Scuttlebutt in Venice is that Antonio’s ships are lost. This rumor, which takes on the appearance of fact, prompts Shylock to request the pound of flesh from Antonio, “to be by him cut off nearest the merchant’s heart.”
The action shifts to a court of justice where Portia, who is has excellent reasons for wanting to save Antonio, is disguised as a young lawyer to hear the case before the Duke who acts as judge. We know from earlier scenes that Shylock is resolute about asking for his pound of flesh because he loathes Antonio who has deeply offended him in the past. When asked in the court if he would reconsider and be merciful, Shylock replies, “The pound of flesh which I demand of him is dearly bought, is mine, and I will have it. If you deny me, fie upon your law!” He seeks vengeance against Antonio by sticking to the letter of the law within the Venetian justice system. Portia makes her speech about mercy in a last-ditch effort to save Antonio’s life.

Portia tries to persuade him about the value of being merciful saying at the beginning of her speech that mercy is twice blessed, blessing both the giver and the receiver. Her speech continues,

‘Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
the attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this scept’red sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power does then show likest God’s
When mercy seasons justice.

She notes that rulers who demonstrate their power in many ways, should show mercy as well, which ranks above temporal power in God’s eyes. She then wraps up her speech saying,

Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this:
That, in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.

Portia reasons that since all men are sinful, all need God’s mercy in order to achieve salvation. Men should emulate God and show mercy when necessary.

At the end of the scene, Portia uses the law which Shylock has championed so strongly, to free Antonio. She states that although Shylock is owed his pound of flesh, “not one drop of Christian blood” should be shed in the process of cutting it off. If blood is shed, Shylock’s lands and goods will be confiscated. When Shylock realizes he has lost the case, he tries to argue instead that he will abandon taking the pound of flesh and only redeem his principal but to no avail.
It is then that we learn that the Christians may not have extended mercy to Shylock after all. He is sentenced to forfeit all his wealth and convert to Christianity. Even if we accept the argument that a conversion to Christianity is considered a blessing for the individual, this final act of forced conversion renders Shylock unable to make a living, since usurers could not be Christians, and isolates him from his religious community. Shakespeare reminds his audience that the mercy which Portia so eloquently argued for at the beginning of the trial, was in the end not consistently practiced. There is no happy resolution for Shylock at the end of the play. Portia says nothing further about mercy at the end of Act IV when Shylock is sentenced except to admonish him to “beg mercy of the Duke.”

Our text for today from the book of Matthew shows no such ambiguity. It is taken from the Beatitudes, a set of teachings by Jesus that are expressed as blessings in the Sermon on the Mount. Each of the eight Beatitudes consists of two phrases: the condition and the result. We are focusing on the fifth Beatitude, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.” This verse exhorts us to show love, compassion and forgiveness to our neighbors which will be rewarded by salvation in the next world as well as peace in this life. Thus, an important take-away from Shakespeare’s play is this. To be merciful means that whatever mercy we desire from God, we must also show to our fellow man without reservation. We cannot pick and choose how, where or to whom to dispense mercy. It must be practiced daily and universally applied, as taught by Christ. Amen.