

One New Book for the Preacher

Sara Hayden

Emory Center for Pastoral Services, Wesley Woods, Atlanta, Georgia, and
Christopher Henry

Morningside Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia

Toni Morrison, *A Mercy: A Novel*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. 167 pages.

Speaking to a conference of German pastors in the early 1920's, Karl Barth voiced the primary yearning of those who, week after week, enter a service of Christian worship. What they want to hear from preachers, Barth suggested, is the answer to a simple question: "Is it true, this talk of a loving and good God, who is more than one of the friendly idols whose rise is so easy to account for, and whose dominion is so brief? What people want to find out and thoroughly understand is, *Is it true?*"

We who preach are familiar with the prodigious task of responding to this profound question with honesty and conviction. In our work, we have experienced the similarly sacred question: *Does God care about me?* Or perhaps, *Does God know or care that I am suffering?* And so we preach from the pulpit, yes, but also at the bedside of a dying patient or to the family who wants to believe that we and God, at the very least, have heard their long-waged cries of lament.

These questions stand at the heart of Toni Morrison's new novel, which traces the intermingled lives of four women struggling for survival and meaning in seventeenth-century Virginia. It is Jacob Vaark's narrative that initially unites the women. Dutch-born, orphaned, and farmer turned trader, he inherits 120 acres from an uncle he has never met. Although he describes slavery as "the most wretched business" (26) and insists that "flesh was not his commodity" (22), Vaark himself acquires all of the women who tend his farm as he travels in search of fortune.

Vaark's wife, Rebekka, endured a six-week voyage from England to marry the man she had never met. Rebekka is stoically realistic about the situation: "Immediately upon landing Rebekka's sheer good fortune in a husband stunned her. Already sixteen, she knew her father would have shipped her off to anyone who would book her passage and relieve him of feeding her" (74). Coming to the New World, Rebekka leaves behind the religious zeal of her parents, who "treated each other and their children with glazed indifference and saved their fire for religious matters" (74). Her mother objected to her "sale" not out of love or devotion, but because the husband awaiting her was a heathen man. As for Rebekka, her religious faith is faint when she arrives in America and turns to anger when she loses all of her children, one by one, to disease and accident. Morrison describes Rebekka's sense of exasperation at the divine in her poignant conversations with Lina, her closest and only friend, a friend who calls her "Mistress."

The central character and primary first-person narrator in the novel is Florens, a young slave girl who is taken by Vaark at the beginning of the novel as partial payment of a debt owed to him. The scene is painful to envision—Florens offered to Vaark by her own mother in a moment that is to haunt Florens and her mother and give Florence an overwhelming sense of abandonment throughout her life. She comes to the Vaark

farm without hope or meaning, but quickly fixates both on the person of the hired blacksmith, a free black man whose eye she catches and who becomes the source of her desire and aim of her attention.

Vaark acquired Sorrow after she survived a shipwreck and wandered vagrantly through the harbor town where they met. Without family or community, Sorrow creates an imaginary sister, whom she names Twin, an action that symbolizes the solitariness that marks all of the characters in the novel.

And finally, there is Lina, a Native American whom Vaark purchased as a farmhand when she was fourteen, after her village was destroyed by his forebears' smallpox:

Afraid of once more losing shelter, terrified of being alone in the world without family, Lina acknowledged her status as heathen and let herself be purified by these worthies. She learned that bathing naked in the river was a sin; that plucking cherries from a tree burdened with them was theft; that to eat corn mush with one's fingers was perverse. That God hated idleness most of all, so staring off into space to weep for a mother or a playmate was to court damnation. (48)

After being purchased by Vaark, Lina "sorted and stored what she dared to recall and eliminated the rest, an activity which shaped her inside and out" (50). Her interior and exterior strength allows her to become the farm's *de facto* manager, confidant of Vaark's wife Rebekka, and mother-figure to the other two slaves on Vaark's small farm.

They begin together, peaceably tolerant of one another, their subsistent labor providing minimal benefits to each. Still, the roles of the women are tenuous and remind one of the stories of contest in scarcity and danger in the Bible. Like Ruth and Naomi or Sarah and Hagar, the women's lives and relationships change rapidly with circumstance. The death of Master Vaark early in the novel threatens their exposure to interlopers, disease, potential slave owners, and famine. Duplicated are some roles: mother, worker, farmer, and yet each woman, affected differently by circumstances of race, health, and sexuality, becomes increasingly alienated from the others. And like the circumstances that drove Ruth and her family apart, these women become orphaned again. Lina's thoughts turn to the isolation of the Vaark farm and the three women who live without owner or patron:

Their drift away from others produced a selfish privacy and they had lost the refuge and the consolation of a clan. Baptists, Presbyterians, tribe, army, family, some encircling outside thing was needed. Pride, she thought. Pride alone made them think that they needed only themselves, could shape life that way, like Adam and Eve, like gods from nowhere beholden to nothing except their own creations...They were orphans, each and all. (58-59)

As they struggle for mere survival, these four women also yearn for attachment to something beyond themselves. Each gives witness to the profound ambivalence that suffering and alienation can yield. Consider Job, as Rebekka does, drawn to his story as others may be in the midst of unpredicted and incomprehensible loss:

Divine knowledge was less important than gaining, at last, the Lord's attention. Which, Rebekka concluded, was all Job ever wanted. Not proof of His existence—he never questioned that. Nor proof of his power—everyone accepted that. He wanted simply to catch his eye. To be recognized not as worthy or worthless, but to be noticed as a life-form by the One who made and unmade it. Not a bargain, merely a glow of the miraculous.

But then Job was a man. Invisibility was intolerable to men. What complaint would a female Job dare to put forth? And if, having done so, and He deigned to remind her of how weak and ignorant she was, where was the news in that? What shocked Job into humility and renewed fidelity was the message a female Job would have known and heard every minute of her life. (91)

Startling social commentary runs ribbon-like through Morrison's novel, each woman contributing her unique voice, circumstance, and story to the conversation, all conveyed by the author's poetic and haunting prose. In the end, the act of mercy that began the story is given new meaning, leaving it to the reader to contemplate the pain of alienation and the insight that Lina gleans from her story, "We never shape the world The world shapes us." (71) Toni Morrison has written a book that is true, in the deepest sense of the word, and one that will have a lasting impact on all who seek to answer the difficult questions that life presents.

Note

Karl Barth, "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching." *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1935), 108.