

**Tender Mercies**  
**By**  
**Daniel E. White September 1, 2025**

The movie got me thinking. *Tender Mercies* is a simple story. A country-western singer drowning in alcoholic self-pity woke up one morning on the floor of a remote motel. He asked the woman, who owned the place, Rosa Lee, whether or not his companion had paid the bill. He hadn't. So, the man asked if he could work around the place to pay off what she was owed. She agreed. Her young son was curious and hung around the man as he did odd jobs.

The man, named Mac, stayed longer than he needed to. Over time, Mac and Rosa Lee developed a liking, and then a love, for each other. They married. He learned that her husband had been killed in Vietnam when their son was a baby. So, the son never knew his dad. Over time, the affection between the boy and Mac became strong.

One night, Rosa Lee told Mac, "I say my prayers for you and when I thank the Lord for his tender mercies, Sonny and you are at the top of the list." The moment felt like the first time Mac had ever been valued in this way.

Rosa Lee sang in the church choir every Sunday. Mac's first wife, the mother of his daughter, was also a singer, a famous country western star who got famous (and wealthy) singing the songs Mac had written. Some of the songs bordered on the risqué. She and Mac had split when he became violently abusive, and she resolved that her daughter would never be allowed to be in his presence.

The daughter had other ideas. She found where Mac lived and visited. She also planned to elope with a member of her mother's band, against the mother's wishes.

Around the same time, several young men who had formed a band learned that a famous country western singer—Mac—lived nearby and came to seek his advice. They wanted to record music and have it played on the radio. He offered to give them a few songs he had written. Those songs became the catalyst to the band making a recording and hearing themselves on the radio.

It seemed that Mac's redemption was complete. He was blessed with tender mercies. Then came word that his daughter was killed in a car crash.

In the penultimate scene, Mac wondered why he had survived a car crash, and his daughter had not, why his life had changed for the better but that this happiness had now been crushed by her death. In the last scene, Mac was across the road from the motel. Sonny joined him, toting the football Mac had bought him. They began to play catch: evidence of a new blessing.

In a review of *Tender Mercies*, Robert Jewett referred to mercy as "the radical grace of humble hearts."

Several years ago, I wrote "The Quality of Mercy" as one of my *About Aging* pieces. I concluded with the first four lines of Portia's soliloquy in *The Merchant of Venice*.

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

The "gentle rain from heaven" found Mac through Rosa Lee.

Scholar Sudip Das Gupta, writing in an internet source called "Poem Analysis Poem Guide," noted several additional ways in which Portia taught about mercy.

"Mercy is not artful or forced. It is a spontaneous reaction."

"A merciful soul is more powerful than a king."

"All humans have to encourage the deeds of mercy [in order to] create a sympathetic society in which everyone is always ready to understand the pangs of others."

"Mercy makes a person the ruler of his mind."

In his commentary, Gupta underscores "twice blest," "him that giveth," and "him that takes." Portia had much to say about the power of mercy.

Is it significant that Shakespeare had these lessons spoken by a woman, Portia, who needed to be dressed like a man in order to be allowed to make her defense of Antonio in a public hearing? Or that Mac received the gentle rain through Rosa Lee?

People of a Certain Age, I have searched for stories about people who, by their actions, reveal themselves to be encouraging "deeds of mercy [in order to] create a sympathetic society" and demonstrating "the radical grace of a humble heart." These stories are to be found in the lives of everyday men and women who cope with the challenges of their daily lives and still find time to be good neighbors, to help whenever they can.

Such stories don't come from Washington D.C. much these days. They haven't for some time. When have we seen our leaders act with compassion or forbearance and be celebrated for such actions? Some, no doubt, see mercy as a weakness.

There are examples in history of leaders who understood the power of mercy. Abraham Lincoln: "I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice." Nelson Mandela: "You will achieve more in this world through acts of mercy than you will through acts of retribution." Pope Francis: "A little bit of mercy makes the world less cold and more just."

I'm still hopeful that we will find leaders blessed with "the radical grace of humble hearts." We could all use a touch of tender mercy in this regard.

Click Here to email your comments to Dan: [danwhitehi@gmail.com](mailto:danwhitehi@gmail.com)