

Spiritual Conference
Mercy
September 15, 2016

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph

The theme for our conferences this year will be mercy and justice. The first semester our focus will be on mercy, the second semester on justice. Today's talk will be introductory. Next month Fr. Bill will speak in more depth on mercy in the Scripture.

But now, Let's stand and sing, "There is a Wideness is God's mercy."

One reason I like St Therese of the Child Jesus is that she was steadfastly obedient in the big things, but didn't always follow the rules if she thought that God had something else in mind. Most famously, on a diocesan pilgrimage to Rome, she boldly spoke to Pope Leo XIII. Instead of just kneeling and silently kissing his papal ring as she was instructed to do, she grabbed his boney hands, looked right into his skinny face and asked him for permission to enter the Carmelite convent at Liseux (as you know, she had already been rejected). She had to be picked up and carted out by a couple of burly papal guards.

On the same pilgrimage, instead of following the signs at the Coliseum that sternly warned, "please stay on the designated path," she and her sister hopped the fence and climbed down to the floor of the monument. She said just couldn't obey since she was determined to kiss the ground where the First Roman martyrs gave their lives for Christ.

But, for the purposes of this talk, her most significant act of disobedience came when she was 14 years old. Her father was very strict and tried to shield Therese and her sisters from the harsh realities of 19th century France. With this in mind, he had forbidden his daughters from reading the secular newspapers.

At the same time, all of France was abuzz with the details of a very gruesome murder. Henri Pranzini was charged and found guilty of that bloody crime and was promptly scheduled for death on the guillotine. Despite he father, Therese got her hands on a newspaper and read about the whole thing. When she read that Pranzini was completely defiant, unrepentant, and had refused the services of a priest, she decided to pray for his conversion. Every day she prayed. And, every day she scoured the forbidden newspapers for a report on the state of his soul. Therese asked God for some sign that Pranzini would be saved from the fires of hell. She felt convinced that the Merciful Father would answer her prayers for poor Pranzini.

On the day of his execution, Therese could hardly wait to secretly read the newspaper account. This is what she read: in the last hour of his life, Pranzini had once again refused a priest and cursed and swore as he was led to the place of his execution. But just before he laid his head on the chopping block, he inexplicably asked for a crucifix. Taking the crucifix in his hands he three times kissed it and then peacefully submitted himself to death.

Therese knew that this was the sign of his salvation. She believed that God was so merciful that he would accept a sinner into His Kingdom at the just the smallest indication of repentance. And, God is so merciful that he gave this teenage girl a sign that her prayers had been answered.

“Give praise to the Lord for He is good. His mercy endures forever!”

Remember that there were two thieves who hung next to Jesus’ cross. Both men were guilty. Both men deserved the punishment of the law. One man mocked Jesus and the other in the last hour of his life said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!” “Today,” Jesus said “You will be with me in paradise.” The repentant thief was the first to pass through the doors of heaven, canonized by Jesus himself. In tradition, he is referred to him as St Dismas, the repentant thief.

It is not without significance that the first saint was guilty of great sin. The Evangelist wanted to be clear that mercy is extended to everyone. Grace is a free gift. If a thief is assured salvation by Jesus himself, there is sure hope for all of us.

“Jesus remember me when you come into your Kingdom!”

Now, here we are in the final months of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, with its theme being “merciful like the Father.” Pope Francis reminds us that no one is excluded from the mercy of God.

When Pope Francis pushed opened the massive bronze doors of St. Peter’s Basilica on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception last December, the Holy Father said, “to pass through the Holy Door means to rediscover the infinite mercy of the Father who welcomes everyone and goes out personally to encounter each of them.” “This will be a year,” Pope Francis prayed, “in which we grow ever more convinced of God’s mercy!”

Many of us have walked through Holy Doors: in Rome; in Krakow; Omaha; Atlanta; and Miami, to name just to name a few

The purpose of this talk is to help you consider more deeply God’s mercy...not just his mercy for the whole world, but also his mercy toward you personally and how you as a parish priest will personally experience mercy and be the face of his mercy to others.

I have to admit that in beginning to prepare this talk, I was kind of confused by the very word “mercy.” I was hearing it used very broadly and very differently by various people. With a little study, I remembered that I was being blocked by a linguistic problem. In English, my language, “mercy” has a rather restricted meaning. It usually refers to an act of pardon, as in, **“Let me off, Judge. Have mercy!”** Or, “he throw himself on the mercy of the court.” Perhaps a better example for me to use here at St. Vincent de Paul might be, **“Fr. Remek, have mercy.... It’s my first offence. Give me a break, pleeeeeease!”**

The story of St. Dismas, the repentant thief, and Henri Pranzini illustrate this definition of mercy. They were guilty. They deserved punishment, but when they opened the door just a crack, God entered with His mercy and forgave their offences.

These people are like the workers in the Gospel parable who were hired late in the day and received the same daily wages as those who worked all day in the hot sun.

If you have ever led or will lead a Bible Study, somebody in the group will read that parable and inevitably say, “I agree with the argument of early workers, that just doesn’t seem fair, it’s not just.” Well, as you know, the good news is that God doesn’t give us what we deserve, since none of us is worthy of His love or eternal life. When I stand eye ball to eye ball with Christ on Judgment Day, the last think I’m going to say is, “Jesus, please treat me fairly. I’ll say, Mercy, Lord!” Praise God that He isn’t fair! He is merciful.

Please stand and let’s sing, “There is a wideness in God’s Mercy.”

As the cheesy commercials say, **“But wait, there’s more!”** In our Catholic tradition, mercy means more a lot more than just the cancellation of punishment.

In short, “mercy” is God’s love reaching down to meet the needs and overcome the miseries of His people. Psalm 102 says, “The Lord looked down from heaven to earth that He might hear the groans of the prisoners and free those condemned to die!”

This is why we hold up Mother Teresa as a model of mercy. She literally went down to the gutters to meet God’s People and raise them up.

I found my brief study of “mercy” as understood in the Bible to be of great help to me spiritually, and so now I’d like to share with you now those things which most helped me the most.

As you know from your Scripture classes, in the Old Testament, there are two principle Hebrew words that we usually translate as “mercy.” The first, of course, is **“hesed,”** that is, “steadfast, covenant love.” Someone who has this attribute of **“hesed”** is someone you can count on, someone who never lets you down. Is there someone in your life who, if necessary, you could call at 2:00 in the morning and ask

for immediate help and you know that he or she would come immediately without question? That is “**hesed.**” If you have such a friend, you are truly blessed. This is how God loves us. This is His mercy.

Think of this scenario: You’re a priest. The parish youth group is in the middle of its Advent retreat. There are 63 kids on the retreat and the youth minister has scheduled confessions beginning at 8:30 Saturday night. Since you’re not a late night guy, you told him you prefer starting a little earlier, but he explained that a night atmosphere creates a better mood. The youth minister is not very disciplined and the whole retreat is running a half hour late. In addition, when you arrived at the retreat, a 30-minute drive from the rectory, you’re told that you are the only confessor. The youth minister didn’t think to ask anyone else since you’re their priest. The kids really like you and most of them gladly confess. Some kids come with great burdens and you can see on their faces their great relief as you give them absolution.

You get to bed around 2:45. At 4:00 A.M., the phone rings, you check your phone’s ID and see that it’s the hospital. A parishioner is near death. Though exhausted, you quickly dress, stick the Holy Oils in your pocket and head off to the hospital. As you enter the critical care unit, you find that the parishioner is an old man laying toothless on the bed with tubes in his nose and arms. His slim wife is holding his hand and gently stroking his hair. She says that she is relieved to see you because she feared he would die before receiving last rights. She also seems very thankful. After you briefly chat with her, you anoint the husband’s forehead and hands: “Through this holy anointing, may the Lord in His love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin, save you and raise you up.”

Though you feel like a zombie after a night with no sleep, you’re thankful that you’re a priest and have been able to be an instrument of God’s mercy.

The life of a parish priest is a wonderful life.

It seems to me that as parish priests, we are called to be this face of mercy for our people. The parish priest, should be someone you can count on, someone who has made a sort of covenant with the people he serves. My own bishop likens being installed as a pastor to a marriage between the pastor and the parishioners. This is, I think an example of **Hesed.**

Now in an attempt at full disclosure, the story about the late night confessions and anointing actually happened to me just as I told it. But I left out one detail. On the way home, I was pulled over for speeding. Though I said, “Officer can you give me a break, please” hoping for mercy, he handed me a \$150 ticket. No **hesed** with the Pasco County Sheriff Department.

Important, in that little episode with the late night anointing, not only did I as parish priest witness God's mercy to the dying man and his wife...the wife was clearly a witness of God's mercy to her husband and to me, their pastor. They had been married 60 years and her steadfast love and attentiveness to her dying husband was clearly an expression of the *Hesed* of God.

A few days later, I celebrated his funeral.

We recall Isaiah 54:10 "For the mountains may fall and the hills turn to dust, but my steadfast love (*hesed*) shall not depart from you." Unlike human mercy, God's mercy is irrevocable.

*Furthermore, it, "**hesed**," is often used in connection with other words which even deepen it's meaning. For example, "**hesed-emet**," meaning steadfast, dependable love. Or, "**hesed-sedekiah**" which means righteous and holy love. And finally, "**hesed-yesua**" meaning, "reassuring, saving love."*

*Regarding **Hesed-Yesua**, I think for example of a young man I know in Pinellas County whose life was a mess: unstructured, unfocused, and wild. He was once arrested for being drunk on the beach with his buddies. Somehow, in God's providence, he met up with an incredibly beautiful and faith-filled woman. The love she showed him transformed his life and eventually, he became a happy and responsible husband to her and a wonderfully loving and involved dad to their children. Her love for him was a saving love. It was a transforming love. This is what God's mercy does for you. His mercy is transforming. ~~And, as a parish priest, I guarantee you that you will witness many such examples of~~ **hesed-yesua**.*

The more you are aware, the more God will show you His great mercy in the lives of the people you serve. In fact, the more you are aware, the more you will witness his mercy at work right here at St. Vincent de Paul.

The second most common word for God's mercy in the Old Testament is "**rachamin**." It means a "tender, compassionate love, a love that springs from pity. Someone who has "**rachamin**" is someone who feels your pain and is moved with compassion to help you. "**Rachamin**" comes from the root word "**rechem**," which means a mother's womb. Think again of Isaiah. God said, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has born? Even though she may forget, I will never forget you. (Is. 49:5)

In his beautiful encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia*, Saint John Paul says some thing I think is very beautiful.. John Paul sees "hesed" as a masculine form of love...that is; steadfast, dependable, righteous, being true to one's self and one's promises. While,

“rachmin” is more feminine ...tender, responsive, compassionate, like a mother responding in love to her child.

God’s love and mercy is like all of this together. He is like the most loving mother and very best father.

I think of the famous Rembrandt painting of the Prodigal Son. The painting hangs in the famous Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. (For my diocesan brothers, that’s St. Petersburg, Russia, not our home on the west coast.) If you ‘ve read Henri Nouwen’s book, Return of the Prodigal, you know that Father Nouwen got permission from the Russian government to sit in front of that painting every day for a month.

In his shared meditation, he points out the two hands of the father on the shoulders of the returned son. One hand is big and strong and masculine, the other hand is much more slender and feminine. Father Nouwen reminds us that this is how it is with God Himself. With one hand he tells us to be strong, to hold the course, not to fear. With His other hand he desires to comfort us and pour out on us tender love and affection upon us.

Both things together are His mercy.

One last thing.

The New Testament Greek word for mercy is “eleos.” It can also be translated as “loving-kindness” or “tender compassion.” This Greek word comes from the root word meaning “oil-that-is-poured-out.”

So, when we sing in the liturgy, Kyrie Eleison, Christe Eleison, we are praying that the merciful love of God will be poured out on us like sweet, healing, holy oil.

To end, let’s sing a Kyrie. In doing so, let’s allow God’s loving steadfast mercy to anoint our hearts overwhelmed as they often are by work, anxiety, or moral failure.

Let us “give thanks to the Lord for He is good, His mercy endures forever!”