

Year of Mercy: Oasis Reflections

“In our parishes, communities, associations and movements ... everyone should find an oasis of mercy.”

Pope Francis

“Oasis” is a provocative image. Although we are not a desert culture, we have travelled enough, seen enough movies, and read enough books to grasp the meaning. Oasis is a place of rest and resources in the middle of a desert. When we are there, we connect with our spirit before we return to the hardships of the demanding desert.

Without an oasis of mercy, the Pope sees life as: “fruitless and sterile, as if sequestered in a barren desert.” In other words, unless we find mercy the desert will dominate.

Since mercy is so valuable, the Pope does not spare his praise. “[Mercy] is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace ... [It is] the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life.”

But so much for praise!

What is it about mercy that is so core to our wellbeing and generativity?

The Pope has many insights, and we will ponder them. But basically he points to mercy as a personal path. “We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy.” His hope is that through this exercise of contemplation “the witness of believers might grow stronger and more effective.”

This is a hard piece of advice. We cannot borrow someone else’s mind and heart about mercy. We must walk the path ourselves and discover the ways of mercy and the life it gives us.

In order to do this, we will have an “oasis reflection” each month. This short reflection will guide our thoughts and feelings and bring us into a world where mercy lifts our minds and hearts and inspires our actions.

The Year of Mercy: Pass Through the Holy Door

“[To begin the Holy Year] I will have the joy of opening the Holy Door, a Door of Mercy. ... Let us set aside all fear and dread ... 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.”

Pope Francis

So let us accept the Pope's invitation ...

Perhaps you feel scattered. While you are about many things, there doesn't seem to be a unity. Something at the center and core is missing. Pass through the Holy Door.

Perhaps all your commitments are in place and on the whole you are pleased. But they need to be renewed, claimed and engaged with the energies that are available to you now. Pass through the Holy Door.

Perhaps the inequalities of society are getting to you and you want to join people who are seeking more just arrangements. Pass through the Holy Door.

Perhaps a negative way of thinking or feeling or behaving is showing up more than it should. It has to be identified and curtailed. Pass through the Holy Door.

Perhaps a past action that has damaged someone needs to be acknowledged and forgiven. Going forward does not seem possible until what has happened is reconciled. Pass through the Holy Door.

Perhaps the violence of the world has flooded and shaken you. You need silence and grounding to commit to the long haul of peace. Pass through the Holy Door.

Perhaps you suddenly realize how much you have been given and how much you want to give. You need a space to express gratitude and commit to service. Pass through the Holy Door.

To pass through the Holy Door is to be met where we are at by a Transcendent Love that will take us to where we want to be.

The Year of Mercy: Remembering Mercy

“In short, we are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us.”

Pope Francis

“You ruthless servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should not you have had **mercy** on your fellow servant, as I had **mercy** on you?” (Mt. 18: 32)

This is the situation. The king, who says these words, had forgiven the servant a huge amount. But this servant did not forgive a fellow servant who owed him a small amount. Instead he sent him to debtor’s prison.

The other servants heard about this miscarriage of mercy and reported the forgiven-but-not-forgiving servant to the king. This sets up the king’s question: “Should not you have had **mercy** on your fellow servant, as I had **mercy** on you?”

Everyone seems to “get it” but the forgiven servant. The king and the other servants know that the burden of being shown mercy is to be merciful to others.

Why didn’t the forgiven servant get it?

The parable doesn’t tell us, but we can guess.

The forgiven servant took his forgiveness lightly, probably as getting lucky. Then he promptly forgot the whole thing and went about his business with the usual knee-jerk reaction of “pay me back or I will punish you.”

The lesson for us is simple but difficult.

- Remember the times we were shown mercy. Perhaps it was a parent, or a teacher, or a friend who responded with graciousness when we most needed it but least deserved it.
- Host these times in our minds and hearts.
- Ponder how significant they were.
- Be grateful to the people who were involved.

The more reflective time we give to our experiences of receiving mercy, the more willing and creative we will be in showing mercy.

Digging Around

“The Lord asks us above all ... not to condemn.”

Pope Francis

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?”

The gardener replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good. But if not, you can cut it down.” (Luke 13:6)

Do you get the impression this gardener is not going to give up?

When the owner of the vineyard arrives next year ready to cut down the unproductive tree, the gardener will be equally ready with his advice of digging and fertilizing. The gardener brings patience, watchfulness, and the expectation of growth.

Patience and watchfulness are closely connected to mercy. Mercy refuses to take the easy route of condemning and destroying the unproductive present. It always sees a deeper possibility that has not been actualized and works to create the conditions for that possibility to emerge.

Of course, we are talking about people and not fig trees. Ultimately, this is not a lesson in gardening but a strategy of human development. Underlying it is a vision of the human person in communion with God and struggling to find ways to embody that communion in how they think, will, and act.

Mercy is the way we help this process in each other. We know our efforts to become a full and loving person do not follow a strict schedule. It can go well one moment and go badly the next. We know we have to return to the struggle.

Perhaps, that is why in St. Paul’s famous hymn he includes an almost overlooked factor: love is patient. (1 Cor, 13:4)

So is mercy.

The Year of Mercy: Self-Mercy

“May the message of mercy reach everyone and may no one be indifferent to the call to experience mercy.”

Pope Francis

The easiest and yet most difficult way for mercy to reach everyone is for us to have mercy on ourselves. This may seem strange, but there is a good reason why this should happen.

We can dream more than we can do. We can commit to spiritually grounded values, but we have trouble enacting them. It is our human make-up.

This means we are built for mistakes, a condition we have to learn to live with. Living with it means mercy begins at home. We have to extend mercy to ourselves.

Look at our wedding vows. We promise to love for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in good times and bad, in sickness and health, until the end of our days. We are convinced our dream of love is stronger than circumstances.

But living this out proves difficult. In concrete situations, the ways of love often elude us.

When a spouse irritates us, we do not know whether to blow up or keep silent.

When our son informs us he is flunking algebra, we fumble for a response.

When our heart is full, we cannot find the words to express it.

In situation after situation, our words and deeds do not measure up to the values we hold and the intentions we have.

No sin here. Just a gap between the desires of the heart and what our words and deeds can pull off. We are not quick enough or consistent enough to always turn our God-connected spirit into flesh and blood.

Therefore, we have to extend mercy to our finite and fragile selves. We have to return to our dreams of love when we have not quite got them right and search for better ways to get them right. We are experiments in incarnation.

Relax.

We will always be more than we can say or do. When we have mercy on ourselves, we will sense a deep truth. The source of our self-mercy is the mercy of God.

The Year of Mercy: The Motto

“Merciful like the Father is the “motto” of this Holy Year.”

Pope Francis

The Pope is talking about the father in the well-known story we call The Prodigal Son. (Lk. 15: 11-32) To shorten and summarize:

The younger son wheedles his inheritance from the father and goes into “riotous living” in a far country. He discovers the nature of money: it runs out.

Reduced to taking a job feeding pigs, he would eat with the pigs, but no one offered. The bottom.

The brainstorm. “In my father’s house even the servants have enough to eat. I will go to my father and say, “Do not take me back as a Son, but as a hired hand.” Demotion script in place, he makes for the house of his father.

Now the motto of the Holy Year appears.

While still a long way off, his father sees him, has compassion, and begins to run. He embraces him and kisses him.

The son recites his rehearsed script with its reduced status. But the father will have none of it. Bring on the robe, ring, and scandals – the signs of sonship. The lost son is found, the dead son has come back to life.

We are no strangers to the son’s hangdog script. We enshrine mistakes, embrace what we have done wrong as our defining moment. Other people are only too willing to help us to do this to ourselves, never letting us get too far away from our egregious errors. We ink a pact of punishment in the secret center of ourselves.

But the story will not let this all too human tendency have the last word.

There is something greater than we are who believes in us more than we believe in ourselves, something greater who listens to our self-hatred but will not fully subscribe to its negative assessment. This something greater acts out of its own truth, a truth it will never compromise. “Even though our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts.” (1 Jn. 3: 20)

The “motto” of the Holy Year never settles for hired hands. Neither should we.

The Year of Mercy: Visit the Sick, Bury the Dead

“It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal ... works of mercy.”

Pope Francis

The corporal works of mercy developed as Christians cared for world in which they lived - feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, bury the dead.

To reflect on these works includes knowing their history that inspires us to commit to them.

The world in which the Christian movement began was a world of plagues. During 165-180 C.E., it is estimated that thirty percent of the population of Antioch died and another thirty percent fled, including the physicians. There was no dishonor in fleeing. It was the accepted strategy.

However, Christians had a different approach based on a different reasoning. They believed God loved them and their response was to love one another. “One another” meant all people, not just members of the Christian community. So when the epidemics came, the Christians stayed to nurse and care for the sick. Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, said:

This plague searches out the justice of each and every one: whether the well care for the sick, whether relatives dutifully love kinsmen as they should, whether masters show compassion to their ailing slaves, whether physicians do not desert the afflicted begging their help... These are trying exercises for us, not deaths; they give the mind the glory of fortitude.

Although no one is quite sure exactly what these ancient diseases were, modern medical experts believe that conscientious nursing could cut the mortality rate by two-thirds or even more. This is what seems to have happened.

So when people came back to the cities after the plague had dissipated, they found many of their loved ones whom they had left for dead alive and well. Christians had “visited the sick,” had nursed them back to health. Others had died and Christians had buried them. The Christians brought the people who had loved them to their gravesites. Therefore, Christians became known as people who visited the sick and buried the dead.

Not a bad identity, and one that we continue down to this day.

The Year of Mercy: Comfort the Sorrowful, Instruct the Ignorant

“It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the spiritual ... works of mercy.”

Pope Francis

The spiritual works of mercy developed as Christians cared for the world in which they lived – admonish the sinner, counsel the doubtful, comfort the sorrowful, instruct the ignorant, bear wrongs patiently, forgive all injuries, pray for the living and the dead.

To reflect on these works includes doing them and then looking back on what we have done and who we have become.

Take comforting the sorrowful. We have all found ourselves accompanying someone who has suffered a divorce, or lost a spouse to death, or was downsized, or was overlooked for the promotion they desperately needed, or was disappointed in their children’s behavior, or was driven by debilitating anxieties, or etc. In short, we and our family and friends suffer in one way or another; and we walk together.

In comforting the sorrowful, we often don’t know what to say. We want to console and we bring forward whatever wisdom we have. We say things like, “Call me” or “If I can do anything, just let me know.”

But we soon come to understand comforting the sorrowful is not about banishing grief but about walking with a person we love until what has come to pass is somehow integrated into a larger identity and purpose.

Take instructing the ignorant. If we are teachers, the application is obvious. But this spiritual work goes beyond formal instruction. It means we communicate whatever knowledge we have in a way that empowers those who receive it.

It may be a parent bent over and soft talking into the ear of a child, or a boss carefully explaining to an employee what needs to be done, or a friend pointing out the implications of a decision. We all have some knowledge that would benefit others; and, instead of keeping it to ourselves, we offer it in the hope that it will help.

In comforting the sorrowful and instructing the ignorant we become other-centered; and, as every spiritual tradition knows, in becoming other-centered we enter into the deepest secret about ourselves. Being merciful is our true identity.

The Year of Mercy: The Eternal Mystery of Love

“To repeat continually ‘for his mercy endures forever,’ as the psalm [136] does, seems to break through the dimensions of space and time, inserting everything into the eternal mystery of love.”

Pope Francis

The “eternal mystery of love” is not as pressing as getting to work, shepherding kids, and making meals. The immediate that has to be done occupies the mind and motivates the hands. The big picture is often lost; small pictures, one after the other, monopolize.

Yet Psalm 136 holds together the eternal mystery of love and the practical plans of survival. After each recital of some aspect of creation, covenant, and human need, the psalm remembers, “God’s mercy endures forever.” (Sometime “mercy” is translated as “steadfast love.”) “Who remembered us in our low estate, for God’s mercy endures forever. Who gives food to all flesh, for God’s mercy endures forever...”

As we wake in the pre-dawn darkness, God’s mercy endures forever.

As we realize we love the people we are with, God’s mercy endures forever.

As we worry over the health of ones we love, God’s mercy endures forever.

As we make decisions without knowing all the consequences, God’s mercy endures forever.

As we struggle to include those with less in more of the goods of the earth, God’s mercy endures forever.

As we thrill to the work we do, God’s mercy endures forever.

As we dance at weddings, God’s mercy endures forever.

As we hold the hands of the elderly to steady their steps, God’s mercy endures forever.

What the Pope is trying to tell us, via the psalm, is that our lives are more than they seem. If we can bring that more into our minds and hearts, meaning and purpose will run through every fiber of our being. Our lives will be richer.

Try it.

The Year of Mercy: The Spirit of the Samaritan

“The Jubilee ... demands that we not neglect the spirit which emerged from Vatican II, the spirit of the Samaritan.”

Pope Francis

The spirit of the Samaritan is: whatever it takes.

We know the story. A man, going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, falls into the hands of robbers who strip him, beat him, and leave him half-dead. .

**Whenever life is stripped, beaten, and left half dead,
it doesn't acquiesce easily.
Even if there are no words,
life cries out,
hoping stronger life will appear to help.**

A priest and Levite did not bring this stronger life. They see the robbed and beaten man, but pass by.

**They are too busy to hear the cry.
They have a destination, people to see, tasks to complete.
Their calendar conquers.
For them, it is delay that is deadly.**

A Samaritan comes by. He has compassion and comes close, entering into the suffering of another.

**He attends to his wounds with whatever he has.
He has no bandages, only clothing that he ripped into strips.
He had no ointment, only oil for cooking he turned into salve.
He had no medicine, only wine for drinking he turned into antiseptic.
He turned what he had into what he needed.**

Then he puts him on his own animal, brings him to an inn, and takes care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him. When I come back, I will repay you whatever is needed.

**The Samaritan uses his own animal,
supplies financial support,
recruits others,
and pledges full support until health is restored.**

The spirit of the Samaritan is to do whatever it takes to alleviate the sufferings of another. Is there any situation in which you are presently involved that needs this spirit?

The River of Mercy

“... the great river of mercy wells up and overflows unceasingly.”
Pope Francis

Although we often want the clarity of a single definition, it may be better to image mercy as a river “welling up” and “overflowing” in many ways.

At times, to have mercy is to call to a potential for good in a person that is present even if at the moment it is in danger of being eclipsed.

At times, to have mercy entails pointing out the harm to individuals that policies and structures are doing and calling everyone to create better structures and behaviors.

At times, to have mercy means to be patient with yourself as you create the words and deeds that will show love and be willing to reevaluate those words and deeds to find better ways.

At times, to have mercy is to reach out to those who are suffering, be present with them, and help to alleviate their suffering.

At times, mercy entails seeking out the sacrament of confession to find forgiveness and new life.

At times, mercy is shown when you cultivate non-judgmental awareness toward yourselves and others, seeking to fully understand before you rush to judgment.

At times, practicing mercy means asking people about their experiences of mercy - when have they received or given or witnessed mercy?

At times, to cultivate mercy is study what people have discovered and written about mercy and allow it to interact with your experience.

At times, it is beneficial to remember our efforts at mercy are what our lives are most deeply about.

At times, mercy means to enter into compassionate exchanges where you disclose your world and enter into the world of another.

How has the river of mercy welled up and overflowed in your life?

The Year of Mercy: Mercy is King

“The Jubilee year will close with the liturgical Solemnity of Christ the King on 20 November 2016. ... God’s mercy, rather than a sign of weakness, is the mark of his omnipotence.”

Pope Francis

Kings (or their contemporary counterparts) are about privilege and power. When we think of them, our fantasies about omnipotence – unbridled willfulness - kick in.

Whatever kings want to do, they do. Whatever gets in their way is quickly overcome. Even if they want to do good, there would certainly be opposition that must be crushed. This type of dominance seems to be salve for our real situations of not having all the power we want.

Of course, we project this type of power on God who is the ultimate King. Then we ask why God, who can do anything, allows suffering. We concoct answers. Some are more convincing than others, but none fully satisfy us – either intellectually or emotionally.

How far these mental games of power are from the Christian revelation!

Christ the King is Jesus dying on the cross. God’s son is accompanying and entering into human dying so that no one who dies will ever be alone. The mercy of God – real power – is a non-abandoning love that brings life out of death.

In order to understand this real power of mercy, we have to starve our ego fantasies and start the mental and behavioral processes of being presence to one another. In this way the year of mercy will become a seed in our relationships and a catalyst in the ongoing evolution of the society.

As Pope Francis says, “Throughout the history of humanity, God will always be the One who is present, close, provident, holy, and merciful.” And so will those who open to this revelation of Christ the King.

Mercy is King.

