

From The Pastor

For a long time I have used and valued a definition of mercy I learned from another priest. Mercy is God's unlimited, freely given, unconditional forgiveness, for the undeserving. Some will love this definition and some will not. Those who are in touch with their sinfulness, who believe in and have experienced mercy will relate to this definition. Those out of touch with their sinfulness or presuming to not have any 'bad' sins will not value the freedom and gift of these words. They may presume not to need so much mercy in their ability to avoid law breaking or bad sins.

What is the core of divine mercy? The short answer is, of course, love. God sees us as no one else sees us. Whatever the sin might be, God knows the true core and goodness of a person. God might say, 'I know the behavior is not really you. Come back to yourself and to Me, and you will have peace'. Mercy is freedom and liberation to not be imprisoned by our past so we can go forward to find our true self in love. No one is without sin. No one is without some fear of exposure or public disclosure of personal wrongs.

There is a lot of humility in mercy. It admits with honesty that, 'I too am a sinner, needing mercy and forgiveness'. We are one in the experience of human weakness. We can show mercy to another when their sin is made public if we are in touch with our own weaknesses. In humility, we would realize: 'there but for the grace of God go I'.

The story of the adulterous woman makes the reality of mercy very real for those who are willing to see it. In many ways, this story parallels Luke's account of the Prodigal son and his older brother. The woman is the prodigal one. Her accusers and tormentors are the older brother. Both parties need the same mercy. The woman is painfully aware of her sin, while the Pharisees are blind and oblivious to their offenses. As such, the story is as much about the sin of the accusers, as it is about the actions of the woman. Jesus' primary focus is on the accusers and their arrogant deceptions. Only after they wisely walk away does Jesus kindly engage the woman.

In the story of the Prodigal Son, who are the recipients of mercy? Only the younger son, who came to his senses, finds the freedom and liberation of the Father's unquestioning forgiveness. There is no evidence the older son found any peace or freedom at all, within himself or in relation to his family. This seems to be very much the case in our present story. The accusers were wise enough to walk away lest they incriminate themselves. There is no evidence they found any change of heart.

What about the woman? Who did she become after this traumatic experience? You can only imagine that in the shock of the moment, shamed, exposed, and nearly naked, the woman could only manage to survive and simply get away. What about two hours, two days, or two weeks later?

How might her encounter with Jesus have changed her? Once past the shame and anger of public exposure, how did the mercy of Jesus affect this woman? Remembering the kind eyes of Jesus and his compassionate words, perhaps this woman felt for the first time in a long time a chance to move forward. Maybe the encounter caused her to realize again her inner dignity and value, which motivated her to change her life. Is it likely that she felt an inner voice call her back to her real self, coming to her senses, and accepting a better way for her life? I believe she did.

Was she a loving person who found herself trapped in a life she hated and would never have freely chosen for herself? Jesus thought so. He saw goodness and dignity in her and called her to see it herself. I think it is very plausible that this is the woman, who a short time later, very near the time of Jesus' death, sought him out at a dinner party. Realizing the freedom of her new life and the mercy she received, she would publicly expose herself again. In a singular act of love, she anointed the feet of Jesus with grateful tears of love and gratitude, drying them with her hair in front of stunned Pharisees.

Through this painful, yet converting experience, the woman reclaimed the value of her life. The power of mercy did its job, and her life was freed for love again. What has been your experience of mercy? How has mercy changed your life? For some, this will be a clear and obvious response. They are in touch with the love and forgiveness that has touched their lives. For others, the answer might be a little more hidden. With some reflection, I believe each of us could name situations for which we have been given mercy and forgiveness. Consider the little things, not just the big things that might have exposed you to public scorn. Was the mercy you received from God, from parents or loved ones, from strangers, public officials like police or a court judge? Mercy comes in all shapes and sizes and is a profound necessity for peaceful and free living.

For all the woman received from Jesus, the sad reality is that the Pharisees would not or could not accept the wisdom of his love. Their subsequent actions to kill Jesus make this quite clear. Even still, we must remember the words of Jesus from the Cross where all is forgiven. "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do". To receive mercy is to give mercy. Admission of need is a first step. The One who said, thou shalt not commit adultery, murder, stealing, etc., also said, do not judge, lest you be judged.