24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Merciful, like the Father”

Deacon Jim Tubbs, St. John Neumann Parish, Powhatan, VA

When Pope Francis announced an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy he encouraged the Church to do just as Jesus taught: “Be merciful just as your Father is merciful.” The greatest example of God’s mercy is Jesus, sent to die for our sins. God didn’t wait for us to repent, He sent Jesus even though we did nothing to deserve such an incredible act of love. Pope Francis is asking us all to show that same kind of mercy to others – to be Merciful Like the Father.

Today we hear a familiar gospel, three parables to help us contemplate the mystery of God’s mercy. And the spotlight is on the three God-figures, the shepherd, the housewife and the Prodigal Father. Yes, Prodigal Father -- prodigal meaning his love is extravagant, lavish, unrestrained, to the point that some considered wasteful or foolish. In these stories we find images of God lavishing His love and undeserved favor on all his children hoping to bring them home. And here we find, at the core of the Gospel, the message that God’s mercy can overcome everything that separates us from Him, fill our heart with love and support us as we reach out to show God’s mercy to others.

As the Gospel story for today opens we see Jesus going about His Father’s work by reaching out to sinners and tax collectors to proclaim the Kingdom of God. Sinners were listening, but the Pharisees were fuming: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Why? Because in their self-righteous world feeding sinners was praiseworthy; eating with them was forbidden; and extending the kingdom to them was scandalous!

But Jesus saw it differently. As Paul tells us in the second reading, Jesus came into the world to save sinners, not condemn them. Now Jesus was not naïve. He knew that they were sinners and he isn’t excusing or condoning their behavior. He also knows they may not respond. In John’s Gospel we hear that many of Jesus’ followers did walk away and return to their former way of life. But Jesus came into the world to save all of us, even the most notorious sinners, like the Apostle Paul. Jesus saw all these people needed to hear the Good News, so he reached out to them, trying to bring them home.

And looking the Pharisees straight in the eye, he challenged them and their narrow minded view of God’s mercy with these three parables we just heard. Notice how the God figure in each is reaching out, and bringing home, just like Jesus is doing. Notice the shepherd going after just one lost sheep, relentless, not stopping until it is returned to the flock. And notice the great effort of the woman, searching carefully to find one small coin, and not stopping until it is returned to its proper place.

And now consider the story of the Prodigal Father. And let’s go direct to the final scene. We are asked to imagine the Father’s vigilance, seemingly going outside day and night to watch for a lost son, eager for him to return. And then one day he spots his young son and, forgetting his dignity and all the social norms, He runs down the stony path to embrace him. Before he can finish his apology, He smothers him with his kisses. The doesn’t even know why his son has returned. Maybe he is repentant; maybe he wants more of his Fathers money so he can go back to his old way of life. It’s not that his son’s apology isn’t important to him, but for now, showing mercy and rejoicing that his son is home, “safe and sound,” is more important.

And consider this: according to Deut. 21, the younger brother should be stoned to death with the help of the whole village. This is what the Pharisees expected. But this father runs to
get there first so no one will stone his son. And instead of condemning the young man, the village is invited to celebrate his return.

And then we get the reaction of both son’s, metaphors for how people reacted to Jesus. The young son’s reaction is much like that of the Apostle Paul. As we hear in scripture, he comes to his senses. Translation: he remembers who he is and he remembers how loving his father is. And it changes him. He only wants to come home and be with his father.

But the older son, angry and jealous, refuses to join in. Like the Pharisee, all this foolishness contradicts his narrow sense of God’s justice. All these years, and he has still not allowed his father’s love to touch his heart. He still has no awareness of the grace and joy that should come from serving. He has failed to appreciate that his father is “abba,” a loving father, not a judgmental task master. And because he has no sense of the father’s love, he cannot reach out and embrace his younger brother.

And the ending leaves us with a hanging question. Does he go in, or not? Jesus is using this ending to speak to the heart of the murmuring Pharisees and reach out to them, trying to bring them home. He is also inviting us to come home. Will we accept his father’s mercy, allow it to penetrate to our hearts, and change us; and then help him to reach out to those who need our help? He is inviting us to be merciful, like the Father.

So how can we answer this invitation, how can we, in very practical ways be the face of God’s mercy in our world today? The list of possibilities is too long for one homily, so let me suggest one way: embrace the “little way” of St. Therese of the Child Jesus, a Carmelite sister who lived in the late 1800s. The simplest way I can explain her “little way” is this: make a commitment every day to see the tasks and the people we meet in our lives, especially those you dislike, as opportunities to show your love for God and practice being merciful.

One example, from St. Therese’s spiritual biography, is enough to show what I mean. “There is in Community a Sister who has the faculty of displeasing me in everything, in her ways, her words, her character, everything seems very disagreeable to me. … I set myself to do for this Sister what I would do for the person I loved the most. Each time I met her I prayed to God for her, … I took care to render her all the services possible, and when I was tempted to answer her back in a disagreeable manner, I was content with giving her my most friendly smile … One day at recreation she asked … “Sister … what attracts you so much towards me; every time you look at me, I see you smile.” Ah! What attracted me was Jesus hidden in the depths of her soul.”

And don’t underestimate the power of this little way. Mother Teresa of Calcutta patterned her life on this little way, doing little things for God each day with great love, one day at a time. Day, by day, by day she persevered even when others said it was foolishness. And look where it took her; to the Nobel Peace Prize and to being our most recently canonized saint.

The Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy is an invitation to be extravagant, lavish, and unrestrained in showing God’s love and mercy to others. An invitation for our Church to become the visible face of God’s Mercy in our world today. An invitation for all of us to become more merciful, like the Father.