OUR MISSION OF MERCY

Today on this 5th Sunday of Lent in our Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, we are being called to look anew at God, at God’s face of mercy, and ultimately in God’s Word made flesh, Jesus. This year also happens to mark the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare, the poet, playwright, actor, and writer. This is an extraordinary coincidence my brothers and sisters, for the quality of mercy pervades many of Shakespeare’s works. His play The Merchant of Venice is one such example.

It’s the romantic comedy of a beautiful and confident heiress and noble young man who loves his lavish lifestyle. But having squandered his estate much like the Prodigal son, he knows he just can’t woo the heiress by asking her to go on a Dutch date! So he borrows the money he needs to impress her and ultimately succeeds in winning her hand.

The lender meanwhile is anxious to see the terms of his contract honored, even if they are horrific to the borrower. The law is the law after all. With no money available to repay the lender, the young man ends up in a Venetian Court of Justice. The beautiful heiress, unbeknown to those in attendance, is dressed in marvelous disguise as a male defense attorney. Considering all her accomplishments, reputation, and social status as lost, we join her now pleading the court for mercy:

The quality of mercy is not strain’d,
it dropeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath:
it is twice blest; it blessedeth him that gives and him that takes:
’Tis mightiest in the mightiest:
it becomes the throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power, the attribute to awe and majesty…

But mercy is above this sceptred sway; it is enthroned in the hearts of kings, It is an attribute to God himself;
and earthly power doth then show likest God’s when mercy seasons justice.
You see brothers and sisters, it is mercy that makes a king more kingly, bestowing greater glory and honor than the crown upon his head. It is mercy that yields a king power and authority far beyond the lands of his outstretched staff.

For mercy is compassion that has no bounds. It’s God’s “visceral love” pouring into our hearts, like a fountain that gushes forth into a basin that has no drain and never overflows. It blesses the person being merciful and the person who receives the mercy. Mercy comes with no preconditions. All we have to do is simply say “yes Lord, yes.”

And once we do, God demands we do nothing... and everything.

In today’s Letter to the Philippians, Paul likens himself to a runner in a race, forgetting all that lies behind. His goal is singular – to win the race and gain the prize ahead - forever united with the risen Christ. Nothing else matters to him but following the path laid before him. At the same time everything matters to him, as he's being formed into the pattern of Jesus’ life, passion, death and finally, resurrection.

And so it is with you and I. God’s mercy requires nothing from us. It is freely given. To even speak of it demanding something of us makes it sound like there are things we are called to do on our own. There is nothing we can do that puts us beyond mercy’s reach.” Mercy requires only that we accept where Jesus leads us, that we follow His path.

Now I’m not saying that our freewill somehow becomes unimportant or insignificant. We still have to choose to allow ourselves to be transformed by His mercy along the way. In this sense, mercy requires everything because the path is set by God, not by us. Like a runner who must seek time to train, fuel up, hydrate, rest, trust and believe, saying ”yes” to God’s mercy calls us to live each day as authentic reflections of Jesus, accepting the loss of “things” and prioritizing continuous conversion, prayer, contrition, penance, and mercy on others. “These acts aren’t obligations. They’re consequences. They’re what result from God granting us mercy.”

Accepting God’s mercy requires nothing... and everything.

Take for example John’s Gospel narrative of the woman caught in adultery. At no point does Jesus concern himself with what motivated the woman or her partner to engage in such behavior. Jesus shows us another way. Without denying or ignoring her sin, Jesus pardons her. She is sent on her way to reform her behavior in accord with the divine mercy that’s been shown to her.

You see God’s mercy is the perfection of justice, its highest expression, “an equal opportunity form of love, which seeks to heal the good, the bad, the rich, the poor, believers and unbelievers.” It’s a bridge that breaks through the dimensions of space and time to connect God and humanity, giving us what we need so we can be who he made us to be and live the life he made us to live.
There is no place for stoning on the woman’s new path. All the accusers - the judge and jury - have walked away. Now be honest with yourself, doesn’t it seem like justice has been thwarted? Doesn’t it in a way feel dissatisfying or unfair to you? You see that’s because most of us have been led to believe that the purpose of justice is to punish the wrong. When we view justice this way, it’s hard to figure out where mercy fits in. Thankfully that’s not the only way to understand justice. Jesus shows us another way.

Jesus shows us that our response to wrongdoing doesn’t have to be retaliatory, vengeful, or spiteful in order to be just. There is a way that is more kingly than a king’s cross and more powerful than a king’s scepter. It’s on the path to Jesus accepting God’s mercy to reconcile, restore, and redeem the balance of wrong through the understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God.

As we approach this altar and the road to Calvary, let us be mindful that justice will never be served when we choose actions which devalue human dignity. That, my brothers and sisters, is a race to hell. As Catholics we believe that justice must begin and end in love. We owe our salvation to the extent of Jesus’ merciful, life-giving love.

Accepting God’s mercy requires nothing... and everything. All we have to do is simply say “yes Lord, yes.”

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i Shakespeare, William. Act IV, Scene 1, The Merchant of Venice. ~1596.
iv Ibid.