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When he inaugurated the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis said, “We want to live this Jubilee Year in light of the Lord’s words, *Merciful like the Father*” (*Misericordiae Vultus* #13). In his Gospel, the Lucan Jesus made a similar plea: “Be merciful just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). Throughout the remainder of his Gospel, Luke developed this concept and challenged all would-be disciples to put it into practice. That same motif of mercy is reflected in each of the sacred texts for today.

In the Exodus text, we are purportedly taken back to that time when Israel traveled the desert en route to the land of God’s promise. There is no denying that the sin of worshipping the molten calf was a grave one. But, as grave as it was, God’s mercy for the Israelites was far greater. God forgave them and reconciled with them because it is in God’s very nature to do so. “The mercy of God is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality with which he reveals his love as of that of a father or a mother, moved to the very depths out of love for their child. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that this is a ‘visceral’ love. It gushes forth from the depths naturally, full of tenderness and compassion, indulgence and mercy” (*Misericordiae Vultus* #6). This same mercy and visceral love is extended to each of us sinners, offering us hope because God’s grace and mercy are far greater than any sin, even the gravest of sins.

Paul understood that he also had been a recipient of God's visceral love and mercy. In today's second reading, we are privileged to read over Timothy's shoulder as Paul recounts to his young protégé the story of his conversion. Once a persecutor of the followers of Jesus, Paul insisted that his metanoia or radical change of mind and heart and lifestyle was due to God's grace and mercy. Paul's story invites each of us to reflect on our own so as to discern the hand and the heart of God and be grateful for God's mercy.

Today's uniquely Lucan Gospel — with its narrative of three lost entities, a sheep, a coin and a son — builds to an emotional and dramatic climax. With each lost-and-found experience, this parable builds, drawing us in until we are led to realize that we are the lost son, and the loving and merciful Father eagerly awaits our return.

We all lose things, and we know the sense of joy and relief that comes with finding them. However, it is one thing to lose a coin or even a sheep, and quite another to lose a son or a daughter, or even two sons, as the parable suggests. Not only did the younger son abandon his father, but the older son appeared on the verge of taking his leave as well. We are not told the rest of the story. Nevertheless, we may find ourselves hoping that the older son followed the younger son's example, returned to his father and was reconciled.

Interspersed throughout the parable are references to rejoicing and to the fact that all in heaven celebrate when sinners who were lost are found; those who were dead in sin, through God's loving mercy, have come to life again. Initially, the reactions of the shepherd and the woman who lost a coin may seem exaggerated. Jesuit author Brendan Byrne would have us understand that the "over the top" reactions of the shepherd, the woman and the forgiving father are intended to assure sinners that God is "crazy in love over each individual human being and rejoices exuberantly over finding one that had been lost" (*The Hospitality of God*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minn.: 2000).

The older brother in the parable, in his resistance to his father's joy and in his resentment regarding his prodigal brother's reinstatement, may have evoked certain sympathy from the Pharisees and scribes who were in the crowd. Their argument, after all, was a reasonable one. Why should an errant son who demanded his birthright and then squandered it on a life of dissipation be welcomed home and celebrated once again as a beloved son? Why? Because our God, who is crazy in love with us, is extravagantly merciful ... because our God is irrationally forgiving.

Can you accept this God? Or will you refuse such a love and find yourself on the outside looking in while forgiven sinners revel in God's mercy?

EXODUS 32:7-11, 13-14

Although many scholars think the incident of the molten calf is an anachronism — i.e., the transference of a later event (Jeroboam's installation of two golden calves at the shrines of Dan and Bethel, 1 Kings 12:28) back into the earlier wilderness period — it is clear that the ancient authors and redactors had a definite purpose in placing the incident where they did and in allotting it such a degree of importance. Not only does the calf-apostasy occupy three chapters, it also introduces an obvious literary rupture right in the middle of God's instructions at Sinai. Moreover, it seems unlikely that the desert trekkers would have had the wherewithal or even the idea for such a grave affront to the God who had just delivered them from slavery.

Old Testament scholar Brevard Childs believed this incident illustrates that "at the heart of sacred tradition lies Israel's disobedience and rebellion. The Old Testament understood this episode of flagrant disobedience not as an accidental straying but as *representative* in its character" (*The Book of Exodus*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia: 1974). The relationship between God and humankind can always be characterized as divine fidelity reaching out in love, mercy and forgiveness to sinful human infidelity.

The image of a bull or calf as an object of worship was known as early as the 13th century B.C.E. in the ancient world. The deity Apis in Egypt was represented as a molten calf, as was Ba'al in Canaan. For the Israelites, the fabrication of a molten image was not so much a deviation to idolatry as it was a desire to have a visible representation of Yahweh.

Karl Barth called this episode a good example of how human religion can confuse the *vox populi* with the *vox Dei* ("The Word of God," *Church Dogmatics* IV, T & T Clark, London: 1932-1967). The institution, in seeking to be relevant to the people's needs, can at any moment produce a "calf" on its own. But need does not create religion. Although Aaron felt the need to produce a calf in a dubious effort to salvage the faith of the Israelites, all that resulted was a compromise that threatened the integrity of their relationship with God.

Moses' mediation with God on behalf of the people resulted in a renewal of the promises of land, prosperity and posterity that God had made to Abraham. With this incident, the theological framework of the scriptures had been defined. When God's overtures of love and mercy are answered by human arrogance, God is nevertheless always compassionate toward humankind. Centuries later, in a supreme act of mercy and forgiveness, God would send Jesus to be mediator par excellence of God's relationship with all peoples and the incarnate pledge of God's merciful love.

1 TIMOTHY 1:12-17

What Israel learned at the foot of Sinai some 1200 years before, Paul experienced for himself on the Damascus road: the gratuitous and redemptive quality of God's unsurpassed love. Although Paul's authorship of the letters to Timothy and Titus is still held in question, the so-called pastoral letters are so informed with the great apostle's thoughts and experience that their connection is no longer disputed. If the letters were actually penned by Paul, he would have written them around the year 65. If they were by a disciple writing for Paul and in his name, the letters would have originated near the end of the first or at the beginning of the second Christian century.

Addressed to Timothy, Paul's convert and his legate in Ephesus, the letters contain directives and guidelines for the growing and developing church: (1) an exhortation to maintain intact the deposit of the faith; (2) a warning against the dangers of heresy; (3) criteria for appointing qualified leaders; (4) principles governing liturgy.

In verses that immediately precede this text, the author recommended the good news of Christianity as sound teaching and the only sure defense against every sort of sin and sinner (1 Tim 1:8-11). Then, using himself and his own conversion experience as a model, "pseudo" Paul illustrated the power of God's grace to transform and to renew. Calling himself a former blasphemer, a persecutor and a man of arrogance, Paul attributed his complete reversal of values and lifestyle to the grace that had been granted him in "abundant" measure (v. 14). It is clear, as well, that Paul regarded himself as an example of what God and grace can accomplish in every sinner.

While most of us might prefer to leave a regrettable or unsavory past behind so we can move forward unencumbered, Paul seemed to glory in remembering who he had been and what he had done. Perhaps it was a way of affirming that God and grace

were all the more powerful. Some scholars have also suggested that Paul's willingness to present himself "warts and all" was: (1) a safeguard against pride; (2) a sure way to remain grateful for the mercy that had been shown him; (3) a way of encouraging others to conversion; (4) an impetus toward even greater efforts for Christ.

Perhaps Paul's utter humility is part of what has maintained his appeal throughout the centuries. By opening his heart and confessing his guilt — though he acted out of ignorance in his unbelief (v. 13) — he continues to befriend sinners. By the same token, he assures the guilty that the source of their forgiveness and hope for a new life lies in the merciful compassion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

LUKE 15:1-32

It seems safe to say that Jesus' three parables about the lost coin, sheep and son were welcomed with joy by the tax collectors and sinners and with a touch of resentment by the Pharisees and scribes. While Jesus' words assured his sinful listeners of God's love and mercy, those same words challenged the resentful ones to set aside their judgments, which were God's alone to render, and to open their hearts to God's magnanimous love.

While the first two parables introduce the third, they also help to steadily increase the pathos of the narrative. If there can be so much joy over the finding of a lost coin or a lost sheep, how much more will heaven and earth rejoice over a son who was lost and is found!

When the son asked for his share of his father's property, he was within his legal rights (Num 26:7-9), but in doing so he was, in effect, declaring his father dead to him, for such a dissolution of property usually happened after someone (the father) died. Money in hand, he made his way to what could only have been gentile territory, because after he lost it all, he took a job feeding pigs. These animals were regarded as unclean by Jews (Lev 11:7), who neither ate nor raised them.

When the son "came to his senses" (v. 17, a term for turning back to God in repentance), he knew his father had no legal obligation to him, but he returned home nevertheless. How encouraging for all who sin! God has no legal obligation to us, but we know God to be merciful and forgiving, like the father who set all dignity and logic aside and ran to welcome his son not as a hired hand but as a beloved

child.

Unfortunately, we might see something of ourselves in the elder son. Angry, resentful and full of his own importance, he refused to accept his brother or his father's willingness to forgive and forget. Brendan Byrne (*op.cit.*) would have us be mindful of the details in the elder son's angry spiel. First, he thinks of himself as a servant ("for years I served you"). He thinks that his service should have earned him a decent reward; he is in a contract relationship with his father. He disowns his brother, calling him "your son." He resents the fact that the younger son has "swallowed up" the property, lessening the amount that would eventually have fallen to himself. He is not willing to rejoice because he is not willing to love. There the parable ends, and we are left to wonder: Well, where do I stand?

Can I love a God whose extravagant mercy will forgive every sin? If I recognize myself as a sinner, oh yes, I can love such a God. But if I count myself among the faithful and the righteous, doesn't God owe me? Isn't it only right that my efforts be recognized and rewarded? The answer to both questions is "No!" The parable challenges those who think themselves righteous to look upon others with compassion and to look inward with honesty and humility. No sinner is irretrievably lost, and we will not find any self-canonized saints in heaven.

Planning: 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

By: Lawrence Mick

This may be one of the best Sundays all year to focus on the Year of Mercy. The first reading recounts an instance of God's mercy outweighing God's anger at Israel. The psalm is drawn from Psalm 51, a key penitential psalm, while its refrain is drawn from the parable of the prodigal father. In the second reading, Paul speaks of God's mercy toward him, in light of his persecution of the church. The Gospel brings us three parables of mercy, including the prodigal father, if you use the long form. If you had elect celebrating the scrutinies during Lent, you missed this key passage about God's mercy on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, so you'd surely want to use the long form today. Even if you heard it during Lent, hearing it proclaimed again during this Year of Mercy seems quite appropriate.

These readings provide an ideal context to encourage participation in an autumn penance service. The Year of Mercy ends on the Solemnity of Christ the King, a week before Advent begins, so this would be a good time to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation as a parish before the jubilee concludes. Find a good week for such a celebration and begin advertising it this weekend so that people have time to put it in their calendars. Consider concluding the penance service with an opportunity for communal joy with refreshments. We all need to learn more deeply that celebrating this sacrament should be a source of joy and thanksgiving; continuing the celebration beyond the ritual can help people to understand that on a deeper level. As Jesus puts it in today's Gospel passage, "I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Of course, planning such a service outside of Advent or Lent may require a bit more creativity from planners than usual. It is easy to fall into a kind of rut with these services, especially if your diocese makes a service available for the two prime seasons. Planners might spend some time discussing what elements are really helpful in a penance service, how places for private confession during the service are set up, how many priests are really needed to keep the service from being overly long, etc. Planning a service just for this Year of Mercy might require reading some of the writings of Pope Francis, such as *The Face of Mercy*, the Bull establishing the Year of Mercy, or his book *The Name of God is Mercy*. Find ways to include the pope's words in the service and in the way you invite people to gather for it. You might also conclude the service by encouraging people to go forth to offer mercy to others in their lives, especially if they need to forgive others who have hurt them.

Prayers: 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

My friends, we can never say too much about God's mercy, especially toward those who recognize their own faults and repent. When have we realized our need for mercy and asked for it? Whatever the circumstances, God's mercy always seems to be consistent. The granting of mercy depends on God, but the asking depends on us, our self-knowledge and our humility.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you welcomed and ate with sinners: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you rejoiced when sinners repented: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to repent and experience God's mercy: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider My friends, let us pray now for a world in need of God's justice, love and mercy.

Minister For the whole church: that we may be ever mindful that we all need God's mercy ... we pray,

- On this 15th anniversary of 9/11, we ask for peace in a world where war and violence continue ... we pray,
- For the ability to rejoice when mercy is shown toward those we resent or fear ... we pray,
- For groups and organizations whose missions promote mercy and exoneration over revenge and punishment ... we pray,
- For a national attitude of mercy when our cultural and political rhetoric promote retribution ... we pray,
- For families who need to be forgiving toward one another; and for parents struggling to teach mercy ... we pray,
- For all who are suffering and marginalized, especially those who have never experienced mercy ... we pray,
- For the sick, the dying and those who have died ... (*names*) ... we pray,

Presider God of endless mercy, you have offered your love to us again and again. We pray for the humility to recognize when we are in need of your mercy and for the generosity to welcome your mercy toward others. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who showed us the depth of your love for us. Amen.

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