

Stingy with God's Mercy?



Today, for a number of reasons, we struggle to be generous and prodigal with God's mercy.

As the number of people who attend church services continues to decline, the temptation among many of our church leaders and ministers is to see this more as a pruning than as a tragedy and to respond by making God's mercy less, rather than more, accessible. For example, a seminary professor whom I know shares that, after forty years of teaching a course designed to prepare seminarians to administer the sacrament of penance, today sometimes the first question that the seminarians ask is: "When can I refuse absolution?" In effect, how scrupulous must I be in dispensing God's mercy?

To their credit, their motivation is mostly sincere, however misguided. They sincerely fear playing fast and loose with God's grace, fearing that they might end up dispensing cheap grace.

Partly that's a valid motive. Fear of playing fast and loose with God's grace, coupled with concerns for truth, orthodoxy, proper public form, and fear of scandal have their own legitimacy. Mercy needs always to be tempered by truth. But sometimes the motives driving our hesitancy are less noble and our anxiety about handing out cheap grace arises more out of timidity, fear, legalism, and our desire, however unconscious, for power.

But even when mercy is withheld for the nobler of those reasons, we're still misguided, bad shepherds, out of tune with the God whom Jesus proclaimed. God's mercy, as Jesus revealed it, embraces indiscriminately, the bad and the good, the undeserving and the deserving, the uninitiated and the initiated. One of the truly startling insights that Jesus gave us is that the mercy of God, like the light and warmth of the sun, cannot not go out to everyone. Consequently it's always free, undeserved, unconditional, universal in embrace, and has a reach beyond all religion, custom, rubric, political correctness, mandatory program, ideology, and even sin itself.

For our part then, especially those of us who are parents, ministers, teachers, catechists, and elders, we must risk proclaiming the prodigal character of God's mercy. We must not spend God's mercy, as if it were ours to spend; dole out God's forgiveness, as if it were a limited commodity; put conditions on God's love, as if God were a petty tyrant or a political ideology; or cut off access to God, as if we were the keeper of the heavenly gates. We aren't. If we tie God's mercy to our own timidity and fear, we limit it to the size of our own minds.

It is interesting to note in the gospels how the apostles, well-meaning of course, often tried to keep certain people away from Jesus as if they weren't worthy, as if they were an affront to his holiness or would somehow stain his purity. So they perennially tried to prevent children, prostitutes, tax collectors, known sinners, and the uninitiated of all kinds from coming to Jesus. However, always Jesus over-ruled their attempts with words to this effect: "Let them come! I want them to come."

Early on in my ministry, I lived in a rectory with a saintly old priest. He was over eighty, nearly blind, but widely sought out and respected, especially as a confessor. One night, alone with him, I asked him this question: "If you had your priesthood to live over again, would you do anything differently?" From a man so full of integrity, I fully expected that there would be no regrets. So his answer surprised me. Yes, he did have a regret, a major one, he said: "If I had my priesthood to do over again, I would be easier on people the next time. I wouldn't be so stingy with God's mercy, with the sacraments, with forgiveness. I fear I've been too hard on people. They have pain enough without me and the church laying further burdens on them. I should have risked God's mercy more!"

I was struck by this because, less than a year before, as I took my final exams in the seminary, one of the priests who examined me, gave me this warning: "Be careful," he said, "don't be soft. Only the truth sets people free. Risk truth over mercy."

As I age, I am ever more inclined to the old priest's advice: We need more to risk God's mercy. The place of justice and truth should never be ignored, but we must risk letting the infinite, unbounded, unconditional, undeserved mercy of God flow free.

But, like the apostles, we, well-intentioned persons, are forever trying to keep certain individuals and groups away from God's mercy as it is offered in word, sacrament, and community. But God doesn't want our protection. What God does want is for everyone, regardless of morality, orthodoxy, lack of preparation, age, or culture, to come to the unlimited waters of divine mercy.

George Eliot once wrote: “When death, the great reconciler, has come, it is never our tenderness that we repent of, but our severity.”

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