

Mercy

- Law School Baccalaureate
Mass
- May 13, 2016
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

For your Law School Baccalaureate Mass I was invited to choose the scriptural readings. I chose readings on mercy. The first, from the Book of Wisdom, is a favorite of mine:

Before you, O Lord, the whole universe is like a grain from a balance, or a drop of morning dew come down upon the earth, but you have mercy on all, because you can do all things.

What a wonderful image of God, all powerful, mighty beyond all measure, so overwhelmingly potent that he can do all things, and so chooses wondrously among all and anything he can do, to show his power by having mercy on all. Not crushing or punishing or judging but showing mercy and not just mercy on some but mercy on all.

The gospel reading picks this up:

Love your enemies and do good to them, and lend expecting nothing back, then your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

This takes us one step further: because God is all-powerful in his mercy to all, we should show our power by being merciful to all as well.

I had the privilege a year ago last November to have a 45 minute conversation with Pope Francis together with a family from Seattle in his private library in the Vatican. His conversation was all about mercy, saying that in all of its history the world—perhaps because of its power—has never more needed mercy than now. He says we live in “The Era of Mercy” and he has invited all people to take a year to reflect and pray on mercy and to find what actions it calls from us. In calling us to this reflection he says something particularly relevant to students graduating from this law school with its focus on “a life in the law at the service of justice”. Pope Francis writes:

“It would not be out of place... to recall the relationship between justice and mercy. These are not two contradictory realities, but two dimensions of a single reality that unfolds progressively until it culminates in the fullness of love. ... Mercy is not opposed to justice but rather expresses God’s way of reaching out to the sinner, offering him a new chance to look at himself, convert, and believe... If God limited himself to only justice, he would cease to be God, and would instead be like human beings who ask merely that the law be respected. But mere justice is not enough. Experience shows that an appeal to justice alone will result in its destruction. This is why God goes beyond justice with his mercy and forgiveness... God does not deny justice. He rather envelopes

it and surpasses it with an even greater event in which we experience love as the foundation of true justice.” *Misericordiae Vultus*, 22-21

So important is it for Pope Francis that we be persons of mercy reaching out in acts of mercy, that he makes “mercy” into a verb, “to mercy”. If the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins says, “The just person justices”, so the Jesuit pope says, “the merciful person mercies” shows his humanity, its truest reality, in acts of mercy, what you might call acts of justice with a heart, law with love as its source. I hope that is important for you in your human reality on this weekend of graduation from law school.

In America we often have a misunderstanding of mercy because we translate it too frequently as “pity”, which is a paternalistic view, a way of looking down in condescension on others out of our benevolence or power. That’s not mercy. Mercy flows from the recognition that we are all needy, that we are all sinners. It recognizes that while all people deserve justice, all people need mercy, ourselves included.

I once heard a wonderful story about mercy in America, or about its synonym “compassion”. I took a course from Henri Nouwen on compassion. Nouwen said that one year he had a sabbatical from teaching at Yale and a friend had a sabbatical from teaching at Notre Dame. They decided to dedicate their year to researching something important; they chose to take a year studying compassion. This took them to Washington, D.C., to ask congressmen about compassion in America. They got an appointment with Senator Hubert Humphrey. They were ushered into Humphrey’s office on one of those typically rushed lobbyist’s visits. Humphrey greeted them, sat down behind his desk, and invited them to sit in two comfortable chairs. He asked, “How can I help you?” Henri Nouwen said, “Senator, we are here to ask you a question. What is compassion?” Humphrey was taken aback, got up from his chair, came around his desk and sat with the two scholars. He picked up a #2 lead pencil. He said, “You see this pencil? This whole long, yellow part through to the tip is competition in America. We are a competitive people. But then we have this little rubber thing at the other end, the eraser. That’s compassion in America. We use it at times to turn around our competition and to fix up, tidy up, or erase what we have marred by our competition. We are not fundamentally a compassionate society, but a competitive society.”

How telling that example seems to me. Even more so today. We would like to think we are a compassionate or a merciful society, but we are not. So many of us are marred by our against-one-another mode of thinking and acting. It invites me to ask what would a society look like in which the long yellow part of the pencil even to the point that writes was compassion or mercy, if we were constituted by compassion rather than only mended by mercy?

Let me use a final image as you reflect in this chapel on your life on your weekend of graduation from law school. The image is right before you. It is called “*Gratia Plena*”, which translated from Latin means “full of grace”. It is the only contemporary artwork in the chapel. One piece to say it all. It was intended to be a Marian sculpture; that is, a sculpture of Mary of Nazareth, mother of Jesus. The title comes from the words addressed to her, “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you”, i.e., *gratia plena*. I believe that if you did not know it was intended to be a Marian sculpture, did not know it’s title, it would still be a sacred artwork, evoking in you a pouring out

of gift, of abundance, of nourishment. The sculptor, Steven Heilman, was looking for a modern, fresh, archetype of Mary rather than overused images which might not stir us. He chose milk, which is our first nourishment, our most primary nurture and support of life; milk, which is maternal. He carved this 2-ton sculpture from a single block of Carrara marble like a huge white cube of sugar, the same marble Michelangelo used. The white of the milk flowing from the upturned vessel is simply the natural color of the marble itself. He stained the rest of it. It is an image of God's grace or God's mercy, symbolized by the bowl with its halo of gold, pouring upon Mary. The sculptor was forced—in order to please the donors—to compromise against his will by subtly indicating the shape of a woman's shroud as the milk pours over the stained stone, but it needn't have been a figure of her. Isn't this a good image of what we have been reflecting on as mercy? Mercy as the overflow of God's being, poured compassionately by the one who is all powerful and could do anything but chooses to show his power, his being, by outpoured mercy. It flows upon us, nourishing, life-giving, maternal, upon all of us, all of us stained, sinful on the outside, revealing the beautiful color of our true reality within fashioned in God's own image, God's own merciful reality. Yes, all persons deserve justice—you are fully trained in that—but all people, including yourself, need mercy; that's a learning from life and a learning from God.