

“We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures. We are the sum of the Father’s love for us and our real capacity to become the image of His Son Jesus.” This quote by St. John Paul II conveys two important concepts for understanding the Beatitude of mercy: first, we are defined by mercy, and second, we are to be icons of the Father’s mercy to all we encounter.

Defined by Mercy

In order to be merciful, we must recognize that mercy defines us. I recently heard mercy defined as “[being] loved when I don’t deserve it.”¹ Does this not describe the core of our relationship with our Lord? We are weak and broken creatures. We fail to love constantly. We don’t make time to pray. We sin again and again, wounding “Him whom [our] soul loves”² every time, yet He never abandons us. He has adopted us as His sons and daughters in Baptism. He comes to us every day in the Eucharist, seeking to dwell within us. He welcomes us home through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Whenever we say, “I’m too busy,” He responds, “I’m right here with you.”

The parable of the prodigal son³ describes the whole of the Christian life. At times, we find ourselves as the young son in a distant land, wasting all the Father has given us in love. In these moments, the Father of Mercy runs to us, embraces us, and welcomes us home with a feast. Other times we are the elder son, close to the Father on the outside but within breeding a heart of envy and bitterness towards ourselves and all around us. In these moments, the Father of Mercy comes to us and invites us to join in the celebration, reminding us, “Everything I have is yours.”⁴

Icons of Mercy

Ultimately, we are called to be icons of the Father of Mercy, embracing and welcoming the lost sons and daughters around us. All too often, we fail in this task. We tend to define those who have hurt us by a past wrong they have committed. We define those we don’t like by one annoying quality. We define those we don’t want to have a conversation with by their religious or political views we disagree with. In doing so, we are unable to look at them with mercy because we fail to look at them through the eyes of the Father. Each person is His beloved son or daughter that He created in love. Christ died for each and every person we meet.

Being merciful does not mean ignoring the brokenness in others. It means encountering them in their brokenness without trying to fix them. It means having a posture of compassion instead of judgment. It means giving people the benefit of the doubt, always assuming they have the best intentions. Being merciful is knowing how to call someone higher in love without tearing them down. Above all, we must pray for those we struggle to love. We must pray to see them as the Father does. We must praise God for their good qualities when their ugly ones come to mind. In time, our prayer will soften our hearts and give us true love for all.

I offer Our Lady as a model of mercy this week. After Christ’s death, Mary lived with the apostles. She spent time with the men who abandoned her Son in His greatest hour of need. She did not define them by their sin; she looked at them with the merciful gaze of the Father. May she teach us how to be icons of God’s mercy.

In Christ, Aurelia Vaiana

¹ Franciscan Friars of the Renewal, “Define Others By What Defines You.” *Poco a Poco Podcast*

² Song of Songs 3:4

³ Luke 15:11-32

⁴ Luke 15:31