

Unconditional Mercy

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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It's fascinating how advertisers can put the best spin on just about anything. While we credit them for not lying, they do stretch the truth just enough to grab our attention and think we are getting a great deal. The way they do that is to add a lot of conditions to the offer; in other words, the fine print. What started out to be an attention grabbing deal, after all the conditions are accounted for, is actually comparable to the expected price of the item or service.

As Christians we like to do this with God's mercy. We like to advertise ourselves as being so compassionate, merciful, and forgiving, but in reality, we can be just as judgmental as anyone else. Consciously or unconsciously, we add so many conditions to our mercy: the person must be 100% sorry, they must change their lifestyle first, they need to make it up to me according to my standards, they have to come back to the church, etc. While these are desired effects of mercy, they are not perquisites. God teaches us that mercy has no perquisites. God's mercy has no conditions.

God's mercy comes across so strongly in our Gospel reading today from *Luke* 15. This chapter includes three famous parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. In all three instances, the shepherd, the woman, and the father showed mercy without conditions. They met the sheep, the coin, and the younger son where they were, not where they were supposed to be. God also meets us where we are, even if it is not where we are supposed to be. In fact, notice the context of these three parables. As we heard, Jesus was with tax collectors and sinners. It was

the religious people, the scribes and the Pharisees, who should have been the most merciful that were the most judgmental: “this man welcomes sinners and eats with them,” they complained.

One of the themes of the papacy of Francis has been ‘mercy.’ In *The Joy of Love*, Pope Francis’ document on marriage and family life, he says, “we put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel.” (*The Joy of Love*, 311) That is a change in thinking! Whenever most of us hear about ‘watering down the Gospel,’ we think of those who don’t take the doctrines of the church seriously or try to over-accommodate our teachings to the trends of the modern world. While this is a serious issue that the Church is trying to deal with, forgetting to be merciful is even worse. That is because mercy is at the center of our faith and is a central teaching of the Gospel. If we don’t get mercy right, proper teachings and strict orthodoxy doesn’t mean much.

Mercy with too many conditions is empty. (It is false advertising.)

How many conditions do I put on mercy?

It is true, sometimes we have to put conditions on our mercy for our own safety or to get justice. Yet, we should strive to keep our conditions on mercy as minimal as possible. As the people of God, may we not just advertise ourselves as merciful, but may we actually be merciful.