

How's your Year of Mercy coming along? Seems like an appropriate question to pose on Divine Mercy Sunday. Are you feeling more merciful these days, or is your soul troubled, like mine, wishing the world were a more merciful place. Some folks, it seems have misgivings about the whole idea of mercy, wondering how it can play out practically in the just resolution of knotty political issues like immigration, refugees, the upcoming election and so forth.

People want to know how we can be both merciful and just, merciful and assertive, merciful and loving. Allow me to share with you some recent insights of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and then tell you a little story that hopefully shows how it might all come together, not necessarily in the world at large, but right here, right now in your life and mine as we live it day to day.

Back in October, Benedict contrasted mercy and justice, observing that misgivings about mercy keep many people far from deep intimacy with God. "It is mercy that moves us toward God," Benedict said, "while justice frightens us before Him...."¹ Unfortunately, a person frightened by God is a person frightened by Love, and fear like that is the mortal enemy of intimacy.

Benedict continued: "[U]nder a veneer of self-assuredness and self-righteousness, the man of today hides a deep knowledge of his wounds and his unworthiness before God." Hiding from God like that is insisting on entirely too much privacy, as Thomas Merton put it a while ago.

The path to mercy begins with the choice not to hide. It begins with the acknowledgement that no living human being is without his or her wounds, both received and inflicted. No living human being is without need of mercy which, beyond simple forbearance, is much more

¹ <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/full-text-of-benedict-xvis-recent-rare-and-lengthy-interview-26142/> March 31, 2016

deeply a convincing reassurance of love. Justice, properly understood, emerges in the expression of that love.

Let me tell you a story about what this might look like in ordinary life. My friend Ernie and I were sharing pizza at his place a while ago, and the topic of mercy came up. I asked him the same question I asked you a moment ago – how’s your year of mercy going, Ernie?

“I don’t think my boss got the memo,” he said. “It’s still like walking on eggshells there. For myself, I’d say I think I’m a little more compassionate. I try to teach the kids about mercy by example. But we should probably ask them directly if you really want to know how well it’s working.”

I nodded agreement and asked if we could invite Alice and Tommy into the conversation.

We did, and a few moments later they joined us. I asked them how their Dad was doing.

“He’s gotten worse,” Alice said, as Ernie winced. I noticed that she had winked at her brother as they came into the room though, so I suspected something was up. Their expressions also made me think that they probably had been eavesdropping on our conversation.

“Yeah, much worse,” Tommy agreed.

“How have I gotten worse?” Ernie asked plaintively.

“Remember when we were six and seven, when you got your new Lexus?” Alice asked.

“Well, yes,” Ernie said.

“And Alice and I were throwing rocks in the driveway one day?” Tommy continued.

“Not really,” Ernie said. “I don’t remember that.”

“And Alice threw one that put a big dent in the right front quarter panel?” Tommy went on.

“Oh...that,” Ernie said. “Now I remember! That cost...”

“And how I thought my life was over,” Alice interrupted. “And how I knew there was no place to hide and how afraid I was that you wouldn’t love me anymore?”

“Alice...” Ernie started to say, but the kids wouldn’t let him talk. Instead, they sang him a duet that went like this:

“And how you came out calmly, looked at the dent, and called me and Alice together?”

“And how you asked me to touch the dent and tell you how I would’ve felt if that dent had been in Tommy’s head instead of the car?”

“And how you didn’t even raise your voice at us, but told us we were more important than any car that was ever made?”

“And how you asked us whether we thought we should be punished?”

“And how you asked us what the punishment should be after we said ‘yes’?”

“And how you said ‘no,’ you weren’t going to spank us the way we said we deserved, but that we had to spend quiet time in our rooms, thinking and praying?”

“And how we cried and you hugged us, walked us to our rooms, and made us promise not to throw rocks at each other ever again because you loved us and you and mom would be so very sad if we got hurt?”

“And how you wiped away our tears and told us we had just learned all there was to learn about mercy?”

Ernie gulped and stared at his children in amazement and asked, “You remember all that?”

“It was perfect, Dad,” Tommy said, his voice trembling a little bit.

“You couldn’t have done it better,” Alice agreed with a tear in her eye. “It was all there, Dad – justice, love and mercy. We’ve never forgotten.”

“Which is what we meant when we said you’ve gotten worse,” Tommy said.

“You couldn’t ever top that, Dad,” Alice agreed.

I finished my pizza and left, wondering how many of the world’s problems would look differently if everyone could absorb injury like that, like Jesus did on the cross – acknowledging that we will indeed harm each other from time to time, sometimes grievously; yet responding compassionately with creative, life-giving justice, love and mercy in ways that preserve the integrity of each. Wouldn’t that indeed be the kingdom of God Isaiah described so well – a kingdom of love, vast and forever peaceful? A kingdom of Divine Mercy.