Reflections by Fr. Fiorelli

2015 Retreat November 14, 2015

FIRST REFLECTION: “The Quality of Mercy”

I am grateful to be invited, once again, to share with you a morning of reflection in the presence of the Lord on the theme of this Day of Recollection and Retreat: “Survivors and Mercy.” Together, let us pray for the grace that each of you needs at this time to enrich the journey of healing on which you are traveling.

I am grateful, too, to be present here as you share your wisdom and mercy with each other. There are mercies and hard-won insights that each of you can offer to one another as no else can. Truly, you are Christ to one another’s healing. You are to each other what Pope Francis called “heralds of mercy” after having endured, yourselves, abuse and trauma in which there was no mercy but only aloneness.

When the Holy Father describes survivors as “heralds of mercy,” it is helpful not to read his beautiful expression too expansively. Indeed, let’s not think that being “heralds of mercy” means, first and foremost, that you are ready to forgive those who abused you or those who chose not to listen to you. With God’s grace that may come with time but if not in this life then perhaps from heaven, as we will see later in the case of St. Maria Goretti. For now and for the purposes of these reflections today, let’s understand the Pope’s expression, “heralds of mercy” as directed principally as the mercy that you show towards yourselves and towards fellow survivors.

We gather together today in fellowship. Here, you are not alone. You have each other and each one’s story of survival and resilience. Just by being together today in the Lord’s presence and in prayer and mutual support, we become true heralds of mercy and kindness to one another. Here, just how uniquely gifted your suffering has left you may become clearer. Here, you may be uplifted to see that you have mercy to offer to others, and to live the mercy of Jesus in the lives of others.

Soon Advent will begin and, with it, a new liturgical year, a year which Pope Francis has dedicated as the “Year of Mercy.” Today, let us consider “mercy” in light of each survivor’s past abuse, present survival and future thriving in the grace of God.

But before we get too far into the topic of “mercy” and how it is experienced in a unique manner by survivors of childhood sexual abuse, I would like to ask this question: “What do we mean when we use the word, ‘mercy’?” Here is a definition that I have found helpful: mercy is: “compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.”

That may sound a bit abstract. So I thought a parable from Scripture that treats explicitly of mercy might be helpful. It is the Parable of what I call, “The Merciful King” and it is found in Matthew 18: 23-27: The context of this parable is a question that Peter asks Jesus. Peter wants to know how often he is expected to forgive his brother who wrongs him. Peter suggests a generous “seven times.” Jesus insists that he must forgive him “seventy times seven” which is to suggest “every time!” Then Jesus gives him a parable on mercy:

*“That is why the reign of God may be said to be like a king who decided to settle accounts with his officials. When he began his auditing, one was brought in who owed him a huge amount. As he had no way of paying it, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property in payment for his debt. At that the official prostrated himself in homage and said, ‘My Lord, be patient with me and I will pay you back in full.’ Moved with pity, that master let the official go and wrote off the debt.”*

Let’s go back to our definition of mercy: “compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.” It is within the power of the King to punish this man who owes him a huge amount of money. Indeed, he even plans to sell the man and his wife and his entire family in payment for the debt owed him. The man begs for patience and promises a full repayment. The master has a change of heart and forgives the entire debt! We know the rest of the story. The man soon encounters someone who owes him a mere pittance but refuses to show him any mercy whatsoever. The King learned of his behavior and “handed him over to the torturers until he paid back all that he owed.”

The King was merciful; the debtor was not. It was in the power (and the right) of the King to punish the debtor, but he chose not to do this but instead to forgive his entire debt. The King showed the Debtor mercy.

For now, let’s just keep in mind both the definition of mercy and the parable of the merciful King. Later, we will try to see how and whether it speaks to us in any helpful way.

I would like to share with you a poem on mercy which I learned in high school when we read Shakespeare’s play, “The Merchant of Venice.” We had to memorize Portia’s famous silique from that play on the “quality of mercy.” Her words kept coming back to me as I was thinking of today’s theme. I would like to read it now. In her speech, Portia is trying to convince the villain Shylock to show mercy by forgiving the debt that is owed him. Her beautiful words do not convince him, but for centuries they have stood as a powerful description of the character or quality of mercy. Here is part of Portia’s speech on the “Quality of Mercy”:

**The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven,
Upon the place beneath.
It is twice blessed.
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
It is mightiest in the mightiest,
It becomes the throned monarch better than his crown.
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
An attribute to awe and majesty.
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings.
But mercy is above this sceptred sway,
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute of God himself.
And earthly power dost thus become likest God's,
Where mercy seasons justice.**

 **The quality of mercy is not strained:** This means that mercy cannot be constrained or forced or compelled. It must be freely bestowed from some movement or grace deep within the person who extends it. No one can force me to be merciful to another, but I can compel myself from within to be merciful. Thus, mercy must be freely bestowed or it is not really mercy at all.

**It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath.**  Being freely bestowed, mercy has to fall as gently, as “naturally” and as “easily” as a soft rains falls upon the earth. This is a powerful image of mercy. Mercy is a quiet, gentle kind of compassion. It does much good but without much fanfare.

**It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.** When mercy is shown, it not only blesses the one who receives it but also the one who grants it. The debtor in our parable is certainly blessed. His huge debt is entirely forgiven. I remember reading that this scripture passage implies an incredibly large debt that would takes years and years of hard work to repay. The King’s mercy forgives the debt completely. The debtor probably could not at first believe this good news. It must have seemed incredible to him, as indeed it was.

But the King is blessed as well. There is a happiness or joy or a deep-down satisfaction in the one who shows mercy. The King did not get any of his money back but he got something much more satisfying, something much more enriching and ennobling.

**It is mightiest in the mightiest. It becomes the throned monarch better than his crown:** Jesus makes excuses for those who crucify him: *“Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.”* In those words, Jesus manifests a power and a strength and a heart greater and nobler and better than those who seemed to be in control on Calvary. The mercy of God’s own Son at the very moment of his cruel and painful crucifixion is the most unparalleled act of mercy in all of history. This why St. Francis de Sales describes Calvary as “the School of love.” Only there do we learn what it means to love as Jesus loved.

**His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
An attribute to awe and majesty.
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings.** All that a king’s scepter shows is the force and strength of earthly power. The King in our parable certainly had that earthly power and he could have wielded it, but he freely chose not to. He had the right on his side and he had the power to enforce that right. He had “justice” on his side, but chose to show mercy instead.

**But mercy is above this sceptred sway,
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings**: Mercy is mightier than earthly power. It does not reside in the force of arms or in the power of money or might, but in the human heart. It is not an earthly possession but a heavenly gift. In the end, it is a grace.

**It is an attribute of God himself:** WOW! Mercy is an attribute of God himself. Ever since Pope Francis announced the Year of Mercy which begins soon, I have noticed how often the word or concept of mercy appears in Scripture and in the readings and parts of the Mass. Mercy is a special character of God that he bestows upon us through grace and the gift of his out-poured Holy Spirit.

**And earthly power dost thus become likest God's,
Where mercy seasons justice.** If we have any power over others-- as the King of our parable certainly has over the man who owed him a huge debt-- that power is like God’s power when justice is seasoned with mercy. The King has justice on his side. He is owed a huge debt. But he chooses instead to exercise mercy toward the debtor, not strict justice. Justice that is tempered with mercy is a God-like quality. The King in our parable showed a God-like quality in forgiving a huge debt when the debtor begged him for mercy.

These are just a few random thoughts on mercy as seen in one scripture parable as viewed through the words of a famous speech on the quality of mercy in one of Shakespeare’s plays. Only the Holy Spirit will let us know how or whether they will speak to each of you in some small way.

Maybe, it is only from the perspective of glory that mercy can be shown to some people. I think of the story of St. Maria Goretti. She appeared to her would-be rapist in his prison cell after her martyrdom at 12 and forgave him. She shows him mercy, but she does so only after she is with God in glory. Is God trying to tell victims of child sexual abuse something in this incident? Maybe, it just isn’t within your power to show mercy to the perpetrator or to those who did not listen to your story until you are with God in glory. So, let’s not think that being “heralds of mercy” means, first and foremost, that you have to be able to forgive those who abused you. With God’s grace that may come in time but if not in time then perhaps from heaven.

So in looking today at how you can be what Pope Francis describes as “heralds of mercy,” think of yourselves as “heralds of mercy” not so much in terms of those who abused you, but of mercy towards yourself and others.

SECOND REFLECTION: “MERCY IN THE PRESENCE OF SHAME AND GUILT”

I have one concern about the topic of mercy for our theme today. Survivors live part of their lives – sometimes all their lives – feeling guilty. Shame can be a central struggle in your recovery from abuse. Even those of you who have made astounding progress can, at the mere mention of “mercy,” perhaps feel a sense of guilt. This topic is so sensitive that I wondered if it ought perhaps to be avoided altogether. But I am convinced that in the context of prayer we can proceed, but carefully, gently, caringly. It seems worth the effort. I have been blessed in coming to know many of you over the years. I have come to understand and appreciate how you really are “heralds of mercy” in a broken and unjust world.

#### You have a special understanding of and a gift for mercy. I encourage you to draw on your own survival and resilience as a spiritual wealth from which to offer mercy: first for yourselves, then for one other, and then for many others as well.

It seems to me that the call to survivors to be heralds of mercy is first of all a call to confront the shame that often burdens you. One of the consequences of child sexual abuse is a feeling of shame for what has happened. Even though you begin to unravel its origins and meaning early in your recovery, it can still recur when events trigger your memories – or when you are tired or discouraged by everyday life. A feeling of shame often drives you to “do,” that is, you begin to think –mistakenly--that you must earn God’s love when you all you really have to do is simply to accept it.

For me who has been blessed to know you, this drive to deserve mercy stands in stark contrast to how generously merciful and caring you are to others and to each other. You find it much easier to be merciful and caring toward others than towards yourself.

You may indeed feel broken. You may actually be broken in some ways. And there are important steps that can be taken for care and healing. But you do not need to wait or somehow earn the right to shine a light on another’s path. Given the beauty of grace, even our shortcomings are part of how the Lord shines through us. As St. Paul often reminds us, the Lord likes to make use of earthen vessels in order to make clear that it is grace, not our efforts, that bring healing and shower mercy. Thus, our very brokenness is a way for the Lord’s light to touch others!

Here the question becomes: what are the impediments to your ability to shine ever more freely? For survivors and their loved ones, often that impediment is a sense of shame or of guilt – a feeling of unworthiness.

Intellectually, you may be able to agree with what St. Paul says about God working through our brokenness. You may even understand, at least in your heard, that there is absolutely no rational basis for feelings of shame or unworthiness because of what others have done to you. You KNOW that what happened to you was not of your own doing. You KNOW that you did not cause the abuse. You KNOW that you did not deserve to be abused. You KNOW that you are innocent of the terrible sin that was perpetrated upon you. Still, we understand that part of recovery from abuse is getting your *HEART* to agree with your *HEAD* on this matter. This may take much time and much effort.

But until you are able to get your heart to agree with you head on the issue of guilt and shame, here is a spiritual strategy from the Salesian spiritual tradition that may help. As soon as we in the Salesian family see ourselves becoming entangled in what the 12 Step Programs call, “stinking thinking,” we quickly “cut short” that kind of thinking. In French, the words, “cut short,” are “couper court.” To “couper court” is simply to refuse to listen to the “stinking thinking” of our head and to follow the conviction of our heart: ***“I am not guilty. The perpetrator is guilty, not me. This is not my shame or my sin. The guilt and shame are the perpetrator’s alone. This I believe. This I know.”*** Then you quietly but firmly move on to better or happier thoughts or some enjoyable and distracting activities. “Couper court” is a spiritual strategy. Quickly, quietly but firmly, it cuts short any stinking thinking. It is, at the same time, a deep act of confidence in the power of Truth Itself: “I am the way, the truth and the life!” Thus, “couper court” is a real act of faith in what I know to be true in my heart of hearts –even it this is way before my head is capable of catching up with my heart!

It is principally God’s grace that inspires and sustains the encounter between the heart and the head. But there are also others whom you grow to trust who can help you to bridge the gap between head and heart. One of many gifts of this fellowship of survivors is how each of you sees in the other absolutely no reason for guilt or shame – absolutely no unworthiness -- just goodness and wholeness, caring and kindness. In many ways, you are or can be the most credible witnesses to one another’s freedom from shame and guilt.

In this, you can help one another to discover that you are precious in the sight of God and very dearly loved --no matter how broken or failed your HEAD may think you to be. Your HEART knows better. Your heart understands how our Lord sees you. Your fellow survivors see the good in you, often way before you can see it in yourselves. Try looking at yourself through their eyes. See their respect for you, their kindness and regard. Welcome their mercy toward your shortcomings. If you do this, you will see the wisdom and the deeper meaning in these biblical words: “I am my brother’s keeper!”

Today, here, together, you have dared to set your burden aside. You have tucked heavy coats and coverings somewhere in your imaginations. So now you are freer to consider yourself as God sees you, the beauty of you, even as some of that unique beauty may have been forged in pain.

Let’s remember, here, in this safe place, gathered together in the name of Jesus, how what you suffered – and what has wounded you so deeply – has also made you strong, and wise, and kind. You who have endured times in your life where mercy and justice were lacking are now able to be uniquely sensitive to another’s need for mercy – and uniquely able to offer it sensitively, wisely, with kindness… with the gentleness that St. Francis de Sales considered a holy way of life.

Remember: It is not uncommon for you as survivors of abuse to doubt your own worth. It is not uncommon to hide because of the shame that lingers. It is not uncommon for those who love survivors to share this sense of low self-image and shame – a sense of failure or guilt for the abuse ever having happened at all, or a sense of failure or guilt for not being able just “to get over it” and “move on.”

As you heal from the trauma in your life, you will come to understand how false this sense of guilt is. You will come to fully grasp what we already know: that the abuse is not in way at all your failure. You will, I hope and pray, increasingly internalize what you hear in the safe circle of this survivor fellowship: “*It was not your fault. You did not cause this to happen.”*

The more you are able to perceive how false guilt and shame hold you back, the more your healing will progress – but also, for the purposes of our reflection today, the more you will see all that you have to offer the world from the wonderful person that you are right now, wounded as you may feel, broken as you may be, grieving as you must. Try to offer yourself mercy. In his advice on the practice of virtue, St. Francis de Sales often urges us to begin the practice of that virtue with ourselves. He says, for instance: “Be patient with others but begin with yourselves.” He would equally advise: “Be merciful to others, but begin with yourselves.” Therefore, look at the mercy you so readily offer one another and borrow some to shower on your own wounded self. With each other you may find it easier to be released from false guilt and shame, self-doubt and fear. The more your offer mercy to yourself, the more you will be able to venture forward and share from the bounty of healing graces God holds out to you.

Now, as a ministry to one another, let’s take time to speak with each other about mercies that we may need from ourselves and mercies that we may wish on others.

THIRD REFLECTION: “MERCY AND UNBELIEF”

So far we have considered how false guilt and shame can be an impediment to mercy in our own lives – mercy from God, from others, and from ourselves. We have noted how this false guilt and shame associated with abuse can make it difficult to cultivate an openness to God’s mercy, to his grace and to the comfort of his love.

Now, in this final reflection, let me focus on something that has been raised on the margins earlier. That is, despite the wounds they bear, survivors often are able to offer mercy unlike others who have not survived similar trauma. Indeed, Pope Francis may have been prophetic in referring to survivors of abuse as “heralds of mercy.” Ultimately, whether this is true for you or not is for you to discern in prayer with God’s help. But, for now, the question is really this: do you really ***believe*** in healing?

The first step in believing in healing is to recognize that healing is first and foremost a divine gift, not the result of human effort or action. For centuries Christians have marveled at the faith of the father in Mark 9 who asks Jesus to cure his epileptic son. When Jesus assures him that “everything is possible to a person who trusts,” the father cries out: *“I do believe. Help my lack of trust!”* We recognize in that Father’s faith-mixed-with-doubt our own mix feelings of strength and weakness, certainty and doubt. Often we experience, like that father in Mark, both belief and unbelief at one and the same time. So it’s no surprise that as survivors heal from the aftermath of abuse, they may feel like they are healing, and at the same time think there is no healing happening at all. At times you may trust God to handle the mess and not really trust Him completely. Just as with the desperate Father in Mark 9, all of us can –at one and the same time--be filled with belief while begging for God’s healing for our unbelief. God understands all this. He knows the complexities of the human heart. After all, God has fashioned us exactly as we are. The Father’s simultaneous feeling of both faith and doubt in Mark 9 was but a tiny seed, but Jesus was able to make use that tiny seed of faith, however small, to perform a wonderful miracle of healing for that hurting father’s son. In just his same way, Jesus can take whatever we can manage to give him and work the miracle we need. All we have to have is faith, even a faith mixed with doubt. The father’s cry in Mark 9 is our cry as well: *“I do believe! Help my lack of trust!”* Jesus will know what to do with our cry for help in the midst of faith and unfaith, just as he knew what to do the father’s cry in that same situation. Jesus likes to use our tiny mustard seeds of faith to work miracles in us and for us!

God Himself understands our conflicted human nature. Even this He infused with his divine life when, while on dying on the cross, Jesus cried out to God in both **Despair**: *“My God, My God, why have You abandoned me?”* and in generous **Trust**: *“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”* Thus, you are not alone in the contradictions of your daily lives – or in the difficult contradictions with which you grapple as you recover from the trauma of abuse.

Thus, healing from abuse can be full of contradictions. You talk about being angry for very good reasons, and you talk about needing to let go of your anger in order to reduce stress and tension. You have a natural distrust of unknown people, yet struggle to find ways to bridge the gap between isolation in an uncertain world and trusted friendships. You actually feel weak and vulnerable at times when to others you are acting your strongest. At the same time that you feel guilt, you are also seeking to accept your very real innocence as a child or teen who was abused. These are some of the feelings and contradictions that victims of child sexual abuse often experience.

Precisely because of these contradictions, perhaps, you have become meek of heart in imitation of Jesus who once described himself as “gentle and human of heart.” The sacred and pierced heart of Jesus was broken on the contradiction of the Cross. Your hearts, similarly wounded and broken by the cross of abuse, can make you as compassionate and merciful as Jesus. This CAN and WILL happen if you continue to deepen your connection with Him through prayer, sacraments and sacrifice. Then, the wounds you bear from the terrible evil you once experienced can –just as those of Jesus did--serve others and yourselves with a great-hearted love and a generous-hearted mercy.

Very soon we will move into the Christmas season. It, too, is full of contradictions. The Eternal King is born into time, without finery, without a home, in a stable and not in a royal palace. In the Bethlehem night, the Light of the World broke through our human darkness and God became man. These contradictions of Christmas point to holiness, just as do the contradiction of the Cross.

It is not unusual for survivors to struggle with the many contradictions of recovery, some of which I have just described. Often you are dispirited by them, as if there is something wrong with contradictions. When you do become dispirited because of them, try to remember the paradox that God tends to reveal Himself in contradictions. The Uncreated One took on the Creature in the Incarnation of Jesus. From that moment on, contradictions are not always a bad thing, even when they occur on our spiritual paths.

For many, Christmas is also fraught with contradictions that arise with a holiday where family and gatherings are central – even idealized. For survivors, the pain of such contradictions can be acute. For example, as you know, families are often wounded, or broken, or remain dysfunctional and unsafe. Christmas can be either lonely among many, or solitary in a noisy world.

As recovery progresses, you learn to rebuild your world with healthful people. A little bit at a time, you create what we call “a patchwork quilt of support.” Advent is a good time to find pieces for your quilt of love. Doing so is a way of offering yourself mercy, but also encountering others who will be able to appreciate how the beauty and mercy and majesty of God shines through you – light into the darkness of a sometimes very cluttered and distracted season. As recovery draws you closer to God, you have more inner light to shine upon an unrecovered world. In every encounter you can indeed be a “herald of mercy.”

Advent often tends to lose its deeply comforting spiritual power as people focus only on the Christmas to come. Try not to let this happen, for the prayerfulness of Advent opens up spaces within ourselves in which we can discover God’s beauty and mercy born – even when our belief is weak and our doubts strong.

So, now, let’s take a moment to pray for each other and for the coming Advent season of prayer and the beginning of the Jubilee Year of Mercy.

On your tables you have paper to make a list of spiritual gifts you wish to offer for all the members of this survivor fellowship – those here, those in Arlington who could not attend today, and all those survivors who need our prayers and unique insights. After 15 minutes, we’ll stop and go around the room, with each table sharing its list aloud.