

GRANTING AND RECEIVING MERCY

Do you ever think about Judgment Day? Do you ever imagine yourself standing before Almighty God, the Maker of heaven and earth, and you, and being asked to give an account of your life?

If so, do you ever wonder what questions God will ask, and what kind of test God might give to see if you have lived up to God's standards? And do you ever worry about whether you'll be able to pass whatever test God gives?

So, what kind of questions might God ask us when our mortal lives come to an end? Will God ask bluntly, "Why should I let you into my kingdom? What did you do during your time on earth? What good did you accomplish on my behalf?" Or maybe, "What kind of life did you live? And was it worthy of your identity as one of my children?" Perhaps God will ask, "What did you do with the gifts and blessings I bestowed on you?" As well as, "Did you love enough? . . . Care enough? . . . Give enough? . . . Forgive enough?"

I don't know about you, but I'm pretty sure the first thing I'm going to do when I'm standing before the Lord is to fall to my knees, bow my head humbly and pray, "Lord, have mercy." Yes, I have very little doubt whatsoever that those will be the very first words that come from my lips. The very first thing I will say to God when I see God face to face is, "Lord, have mercy."

You see, without the Lord's mercy, I'm sunk. I haven't got a chance. If God doesn't show me mercy, the gates of heaven will be closed shut and locked up tightly. And I'll be on the outside, looking in.

It's said that when you die, your whole life passes before you. Perhaps it will be like watching a movie, minus the outrageously overpriced popcorn and watered down soda you buy at the movie theater. I imagine God sitting in the seat beside me, watching the "Fred Gagnon's Life" show with me. And all my unchristian behavior and bad attitudes, every hurtful word I spoke and unkind act I committed, will be up there on the big screen for us to see. Nothing will be hidden from God's all-seeing eyes and all-knowing mind.

Gulp

Yes, please, Lord, please have mercy on me.

But will God be merciful to me?

The Christian faith proclaims that, because of Christ's life, death and resurrection, God will show me mercy. I hope so, because my eternal life depends on it. Actually, we're all depending on it. We're all in need of divine mercy. Because, as the Apostle Paul said, "All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory."

I'm depending on God's mercy to get me through the gate. And that's why one of the beatitudes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that we read this morning truly speaks to me. "Blessed [or happy] are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."

Think about what that's actually saying. Jesus is teaching that, if you want God to be merciful to you, if you desire God's mercy, than be merciful yourself. Treat others the way you hope and pray God treats you. Show others mercy, and God will show you mercy.

That's a pretty frightening statement, don't you think?

What if God used the very same standard, no more and no less; what if God used the very same standard that I use to judge another person, and the very same level of mercy I use in being merciful toward others, to judge me and be merciful to me?

If we want to receive mercy, we need to grant mercy. We need to be merciful to others.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."

What might being merciful to others look like if it was put into practice?

There once was a Belgian priest named Father Damien.

In 1863 he was sent to Hawaii. On the surface that seems like a cushy assignment, going to a tropical paradise like Hawaii; but at the time the island was in the throes of a terrible leprosy epidemic. Hundreds were catching the disfiguring and fatal disease. At that time in history, leprosy was thought to be caused by sexual immorality. Lepers were seen by many as both physical and spiritual outcasts. They were pariahs in society.

When Father Damien arrived in Hawaii, officials there were rounding up lepers and exiling them to a nearby island in order to quarantine them from the general population. Stranded on that island, with only the barest essentials and no medical care, many quickly died. Father Damien protested, and in 1873 he was allowed to establish Kalapapa, a colony for lepers. He built a church, hospital, homes, and schools.

He recruited doctors and nurses.

He pestered the Church and the government to provide funds.

He sought research into the causes of the disease and argued that it wasn't

caused by sexual immorality. Most of all, Father Damien refused to be afraid of his parish of lepers. He freely touched and hugged them, even though he knew the risk.

The priest used to begin his Masses with the statement, “Now it is time to worship the God of mercy, who knows you intimately, loves you unceasingly, and whose caring arms embrace you in your sickness.”

In 1883, Father Damien began to feel a tingling in his own leg. He had been around lepers long enough to know what that meant. One morning, he stood before his parishioners and opened the service with the words, “Now it is time to worship the God of mercy, who knows us intimately, loves us unceasingly, and whose caring arms embrace us in our sickness.”

That’s how he shared with his congregation that he himself had contracted leprosy.

Father Damien’s superiors in the Church and the government accused him of sexual immorality. But they allowed him to remain in Kalapapa because no other priest was willing to serve the leper colony; and no other parish would have accepted a priest with leprosy. For the next six years, Father Damien worked to build Kalapapa into a place of comfort, compassion, caring and love for its occupants. He wanted them to experience God’s grace and know God’s mercy before they died.

Finally, on April 2, 1889, Father Damien died of complications from his disease. In 1959, when Hawaii became a state, it placed two statues of state heroes in the capital. One was of Father Damien.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”

Father Damien was a living, breathing, flesh-and-blood example of showing mercy toward others.

I remember watching a talk show a number of years ago—I think it was Phil Donohue—and the guests were several neo-Nazis and their children. During the first half of the program, Donohue allowed these people to spew their venom at Jews, African Americans, Arabs, Hispanics and other foreigners. They defended many of their views with quotes from the Bible, suggesting that they had been called by God to purify the world.

After a commercial break, the people in the audience had their turn. The venom directed at the neo-Nazis was equally as poisonous. Some women stood and tearfully rebuked them for raising their children to hate. Others in the audience suggested they should be imprisoned, even killed. Some called the neo-Nazis wicked and evil. One man in the audience stood up and said, “God hates you!”

The neo-Nazi spokesperson smiled and replied, “So, we agree that God hates. We just disagree about who God hates.”

Maybe we could say the same thing about God’s mercy. Most people would agree that God is merciful, but there’s often disagreement about who God is merciful toward.

Who is God’s mercy for? Is it for you? For me? Is it even for neo-Nazis? If God’s mercy isn’t for everyone, even the very bad and wicked, can it be for anyone? Because, after all, it’s those who have sinned terribly who are most in need of divine mercy.

We’re only human beings with a limited understanding of God’s ways, and we don’t know God’s heart; so we can’t say with certainty who God will or will not be merciful toward. But this much we can say. If we want God to be merciful to us, one of the most significant things we can do is to be merciful toward others. Because when we grant mercy to others, we will receive mercy from the Lord.

That word comes from Jesus himself, who taught his followers, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” Amen.