“Be Merciful, As Our Heavenly Father Is Merciful.” (Lk. 6:36) Session 2/Week 2

Pope Francis selected a very intriguing passage of Scripture from Luke’s gospel for his theme, “The Jubilee Year of Mercy.” Luke’s passage directs us to be merciful as is our heavenly Father, who is the Creator of heaven and earth. This is a very daunting task for Christians. Our God is divine and his Son is “the Author and perfecter of faith” (Heb. 12:2). We are dust, and to dust we will return. Although our sinful nature stands in sharp contrast to Jesus’ sinless character, we, as flawed beings, are still challenged to assume the merciful quality of our God. We will always fall short of the glory of God because of our human nature, and yet, Pope Francis gives us spiritual direction to be merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful.

Reflecting further, challenging thoughts continue to arise when thinking more deeply how we can be merciful. How can we show mercy as human beings when we have an uncontrollable tongue? (Ja. 3:7-9) Are we capable of administering justice in a fair manner without condemnation? When God gives mercy, it is new every day. He is faithful. God’s mercy crosses every cultural practice, economic status, and gender, which challenges us with all of our cultural differences and biases. We fail to see that God made all of creation and called it good.

Mercy from the hand of God is clearly seen as he forgives and forgets. On one hand, I am confident that we may be able to show mercy, but can we demonstrate mercy every day? Although we are not sufficiently faithful, we could become so if we would trust in God’s Word to be a lamp for our feet and a light for our path (Ps. 119:105). This, perhaps, is the reason the disciples failed to pray with the Master during his ordeal in the midnight hour. They had Jesus with them, but they could not pray. This wrestling with the flesh, with their own human nature, kept them from praying that night. We, too, desire to pray, but the cares of this world sometimes distract us, preventing us from showing mercy through prayer. Pope Francis knows the many
hardships we encounter in this world, and yet, with wholly holy boldness, Pope Francis calls us to be merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful. There are two spiritual doors that we must all pass through to be merciful.

**The Voice at the Door!**

A very popular picture exists depicting Jesus knocking on a door with his face looking at you. In some cases his hand is about to strike the door. Looking closely, you will notice there is no knob for Jesus to use to enter. The knob is a very important aspect of a door, because it holds the door in place, keeping it from swinging back and forth. Without the knob, Jesus will be unable to come in and fellowship with the individual. The knob is on the inside, making it possible only for the person inside to open the door for the visitor. This picture provides visual aid to understand the passage in the Book of Revelation, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, [then] I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20). Conversely, though, there is a much more meaningful feature in this picture relating to this passage from Revelation. While we tend to focus on the visual: the door, hand about to knock, and absence of a knob, the real issue is hearing the voice of Jesus calling you, saying “If anyone hears my voice.” (Rev. 3:20)

Our initial calling from Jesus comes through our Baptism. Jesus commanded the disciples in the Great Commission narrative from Matthew’s gospel to go throughout the nation teaching, and baptizing everyone in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Baptism is the door that opens for believers to begin a spiritual journey towards the Father of Mercy. Through the prayers and the community, Baptism leads us to the Word of God so that it may dwell in us richly, “as in all wisdom…admonishing one another, singing psalms hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in [our] hearts to God” (Col. 3:16).
Baptism is a life-long journey, giving us the strength to imitate the life of Jesus, in delivering mercy to ourselves and others. This is why St. Paul candidly explains what happens spiritually to us when being baptized. We die to sin and we are “buried with (Jesus) through baptism into death” (Rm. 6:3). This sacrament separates us from the Old Adam and unites us to the New Adam, bringing us to newness of life. More importantly, St. Paul adds that we are not only growing in union with Christ, but we are also united with him in the resurrection (Rm. 6:5). Therefore, because we have experienced the waters of baptism, “the Holy Spirit moves us to answer Christ’s call to holiness (USCCB 224).” This is the voice that is calling us at the door, a voice saying “Love one another, as I have loved you” (Jn. 15:12). This means we must put into practice what Christ teaches us regarding loving our enemies (Lk. 6:27-35). Here we display the double love command: love God and love neighbor by being merciful.

The Knock at the Door

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., (1929-1968), wrote a speech in 1967 titled “A Knock at Midnight.” In this profound speech, Dr. King chose this text from Luke’s gospel: “Suppose one of you has a friend to whom he goes at midnight and says, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, for a friend of mine has arrived at my house from a journey and I have nothing to offer him’” (11:5-6). When delivering his speech, Dr. King explained how the world was living in darkness. He examined the social order and how we are depending on science more than God. While looking at the moral order he pointed out the relativistic behavior in the world which added to the darkness in which people were living. Although this speech was presented in 1967, things have not changed much since then. The social order today depends on technology more than God. The moral order is truly in disarray. Darkness has certainly covered this world as richness equates to comfort for many. This leads to the sort individualism that might lead some
to say, “They are reading ‘the Gospel according to me!’” This individualism is clearly seen in Luke’s narration of the man who had so much money that he destroyed his barn, only to rebuild a new one in the same place. This is similar to our contemporary era, as McDonalds, Walmart, some banks, and other corporations build, destroy, and re-build, sometimes by stealing or defrauding people or denying their rights. They don’t see the error of their ways. They often do not see how they profit nothing by gaining the world and losing their souls (Lk. 12:13-21). This happens to us, too.

It is because of this darkness or the idea of midnight in our homes, neighborhoods, jobs or throughout this world, your friend, Monica or Jesse may reach out to you. They may call or email or text you in their times of distress. Monica and Jesse are coming to you because they have witnessed how you handled your share of heartaches and pain. They have watched you, and at this very hour they need mercy for a disturbing moment in their lives.

Here you and I must remember the words in Langston Hughes’ poem, “Mother to Son” when he said, “Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.” Describing the difficulty of climbing the stairs, Hughes elaborated on going through dark rooms without light, perhaps because the electricity was cut off when his single mother could not pay the bill. Yes, there was a time when you once knocked on the door of Jesus’ heart, seeking mercy because you were traveling on a dark path of oppression or depression. In some ways, you still may be on that same road because our spiritual battles with Satan are ongoing. Nevertheless, Jesus answered your door in the darkest hour in your troubled soul and called you to a new life, granting you mercy! The same mercy you receive must be transmitted to others; this is your baptismal calling. The Monicas’ and Jesses’ of this world need us to turn the knob and open up our hearts and exhibit the double love commandment. After listening to Monica, are we being call to the spiritual practice of
corporal works of mercy: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked, visit the sick, visit the prisoners, bury the dead or give alms to the poor. Or maybe our friend Jesse needs spiritual works of mercy: counseling, instruction, admonishment for sin, comfort, forgiveness, bearing wrongs patiently, and prayer for the living and dead.

**Synthesizing Two Doors**

Experiencing the voice at the door and the knock at the door in one’s life will certainly breathe evidence that we are living a life of mercy like our heavenly Father. Responding to the voice of Jesus is a daily call to obedience of faith. We don’t always identify the call easily, which was Elijah’s experience when he looked for God in the thunder, storm, and fire. No, his call came through a whisper on Mount Carmel. Your call may come through holiness, similar to Moses’ experience as he stood on holy ground. God asked him to remove his sandals. As Moses responded with complete obedience to God’s request that he remove his sandals, so must we demonstrate our obedience to the Father of Mercy. Regardless of how Jesus may call us, we must be obedient to faith. You and I must recognize that our baptism calls us to “transform the world with the light and power of the gospel” (USCCA 196). This light that shines through the gospel is the very light we experienced when rising from our baptismal water. This is the light that must shine on our friends, Monica and Jesse. Your friend Monica may need this light in her life similar to the need of the tax collector who beat his breast in the temple saying “O God be merciful to me a sinner” (Lk. 18:10). And perhaps Jesse, may be a father that needs to pray these prayer words, “Lord, have pity on my son, for he is a lunatic and suffers severely; often he falls into fire, and often into water” (Mt. 17:15). At Monica’s and Jesse’s midnight hour, the light of the gospel must shine through us, having faith the size of a mustard seed. By participating in such corporal works as providing funds for a desperate person like Monica, we are being
merciful. When we extend mercy and good counseling to Jesse, he can feel encouraged and empowered to wait on the Lord and be of good courage (Ps. 27:14). Therefore, when passing through these two doors, Jesus is the voice that calls us and the knock that we respond to through obedience of faith. Jesus sympathizes with our weakness when we try to be merciful because he was tested in every way and yet he did not sin. So when we see ourselves failing to extend mercy, “Let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help” (Heb. 4:16).

Discussion question: When responding to a “knock at midnight” what inspires you the most to answer the door and to be merciful like your heavenly Father is merciful?