

MERCYWORKS: COMPASSION IN ACTION: REFLECTIONS ON MT. 25

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In Chapter 25 of the New Testament gospel of Matthew, Jesus focuses on MercyWorks as the criteria of the Last Judgment. Herein, Jesus refers to the need to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those imprisoned, shelter homeless people, and bury those who have died. Of note is the fact that each of these actions entails responding to others' physical needs. During this extraordinary jubilee year of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis, it is good to reflect on each of these MercyWorks. Before doing so, let us, first of all, consider the religious meaning of mercy.

In the scriptures, Mercy is constitutive of God's nature. Mercy is what God does for humans because God loves each person God creates. As Pope Francis has noted so beautifully, God's mercy is a "caress of love." The mercy-ing God of the Hebrew Scriptures is fully revealed in Jesus' person and actions narrated in the New Testament. As the gospel writers indicate, during his public ministry Jesus graciously and lovingly responded mercifully to the many people such as the lame, the blind, the deaf and the mute, those demon possessed and lepers who brought their needs to him. Jesus dined with social outcasts such as tax collectors and prostitutes and provided bread and fish for thousands of people. Likewise, Jesus invited those who wish to follow him to engage wholeheartedly in works of mercy.

So, what is the essence of Mercy? It is being attentive and sensitive to the needs of others whom one encounters in everyday situations. Mercy is heartfelt, compassionate love in action. As Elaine Prevallet reflects: "Mercy makes our hearts spacious; it also mercies the space around us. Mercy becomes the space we live in."¹ Mercy is *being* in life in ways that concretize one's love of God through one's love of neighbor. According to Thomas Merton, "To give mercy is ... to participate ... in the work of the new creation and of redemption."² In effect, mercy-ing is healing, restorative activity. With this understanding of the meaning of Mercy in mind, let us now reflect upon each of the MercyWorks, that is, the corporal works of Mercy.

FEED THE HUNGRY

In the Old Testament Book of Proverbs we read: "A generous person will be blessed for she or he shares food with the poor." (21:13) Additionally, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed to fellow Hebrews that sharing food with the hungry is the kind of fasting that God desires. (See Isaiah 58:7)

During college, Norman Borlaug studied agriculture. Later, this Iowan discovered how to breed highly fruitful strains of food plants which, in effect, saved the lives of a billion people, especially those in developing countries. Borlaug, the father of the Green revolution, died in 2009. Recently, a 100,000 dollar donation from the Green Bay Packers football team provided the resources for the Marian Fathers to build a bakery and instruct Rwandans on how to use it to provide food for their people.

The right to food is a basic human right. That being said, in Westchester County, New York, which is one of the wealthiest counties in the United States, currently 200,000 residents are hungry or at risk of hunger. More than half of these residents are seniors and one-third are children under the age of 18. Globally, 3 million children die of malnutrition each year. This means that every 4 seconds another child on Earth loses his or her life.

GIVE DRINK TO THE THIRSTY

Jesus said: “Whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water ... shall not lose his or her reward.” (Mt. 10:40 – 42) Today, water shortages are a common reality in different parts of our world. For many people, safe, drinkable water is not readily available. Globally, each day several thousand children die due to diarrhea caused by unsafe water and poor sanitation. Given this reality, we might ask ourselves how far we each need to go to satisfy our thirst. For almost a billion people on Earth the answer to that question is at least four miles a day.

CLOTHE THE NAKED

In Luke’s gospel, Jesus instructs the person who has two coats to share with another who has none. (See Luke 3:11) In today’s world, millions of people cannot afford to purchase adequate clothing to protect themselves from the elements. In contrast, there are many who possess an over-abundance in this regard. Although clothes do not make the person, clothes and human dignity go hand-in-hand. That being said, engaging in this MercyWork upholds the dignity of one’s brother or sister by ensuring the basic necessity of sufficient clothing.

VISIT THE SICK

During his public ministry, Jesus encountered many sick people. He reached out in love to those suffering from illness; he spoke encouraging words to them; sometimes, he physically touched them; and he healed them of their maladies.

Often those who are sick become discouraged and feel lonely. Some of the sick live in their own homes; others are in hospitals; many reside in long-term care facilities. Visiting those who suffer from short or long term illness is a way of bringing comfort and care to them. It is a way of letting them know that they are not forgotten and that their lives matter. It is a way of lightening their suffering. One’s presence and willingness to listen are immeasurable gifts to sick persons.

VISIT THE IMPRISONED

Jesus said: “I was in prison and you came to me.” (Mt. 25:36) Currently, in the United States a higher percentage of the population is in prison than in any other nation on Earth. Today, 2,240,000 people (one in every 139 citizens) live in prisons in our country. This includes a number of men and women incarcerated for crimes that they did not commit. Life in prison can be very hard and, in general, much is lacking in rehabilitation programs that exist in our prison system. Prisoners look forward to visits; they appreciate others’ taking time to be with them. Spending time with those in prison is truly a MercyWork.

SHELTER THE HOMELESS

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews insisted: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unaware.” (13:2) Today, there are many refugees from war-torn countries and countries where safety is an issue due to human or drug trafficking. Millions are leaving their lives behind to seek shelter elsewhere. Of note is the fact that etched on the base of the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor are these words:

“Give me your tired, your poor,/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,/ The wretched refuse of your teeming shore./ Send these the homeless, tempest tossed to me. /I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

Also, because of floods, earthquakes and hurricanes, people can suddenly become homeless. Those who come to the aid of victims of these kinds of natural disasters not only rebuild homes but, more importantly, rebuild the spirits of those who suffer from such catastrophic, life-changing events.

Furthermore, homelessness can result from long-term unemployment or a medical condition that depletes an individual or family’s financial resources. In the United States, a significant percentage of the homeless are military veterans. Long-term homelessness can lead to alcoholism, drug abuse, or psychological illness.

In Rome, to the right of St. Peter’s Basilica, Pope Francis had showers installed for homeless people. Very near to these showers, a new shelter for the homeless is being built today. In this way, the pope is making clear how important it is to provide shelter for those in need.

BURY THE DEAD

In the Christian tradition, burying the dead is based on the sacredness of the human person. After Jesus died, his deposition from the cross, his being buried in Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb, and women’s coming to the burial place on Easter Sunday to anoint Jesus’ body with spices model honoring the person who has died.

Proper burial of the dead gives expression to words of the psalmist: “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of the saints.” (Psalm 116:15) It is a way of demonstrating that the life of the deceased was valued and continues to have value because she or he is sacred in the eyes of God.

CONCLUSION

There is an urgent need in our world today to witness to Mercy by doing the corporal works of mercy. Pope Francis has said that what our world needs is the medicine of mercy and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI insists that “There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbor is indispensable.”³ The word “misericordia” (translated “mercy”) means a heart that gives itself to those in need. In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul insists that the one who does acts of mercy do so cheerfully. (See Rom. 12:8) And so, whenever and wherever we engage in MercyWorks, let us do so in a warmhearted and most generous way!

¹Elaine M. Prevallet, S.L., “Living in the Mercy” in *The Way of Mercy*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 125.

² Thomas Merton, “The Climate of Mercy” in *The Way of Mercy*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 82.

³Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, *Encyclical Letter: Deus Caritas Est*, 28 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_2005 – accessed 10.11.2106.]