

Homily, May 1, 2011
Second Sunday of Easter • Divine Mercy Sunday
Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 118 ; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31



Life in the Roman Empire was harsh. People in the provinces lived hard lives. They were conquered and oppressed. They had no civil rights. Rebellions were swiftly and cruelly put down. Hunger was a constant threat. The greater culture valued power and patronage. There was little concern for the poor and the marginalized ... which makes the description of the early Church that we just heard all the more amazing.

Yet much of what is said of them is also true for us. We devote ourselves to the teachings of the Apostles, breaking bread, and prayers. Obviously we don't live communally any more, but we do worship together as a community and we do give our money and our time to the Church. We give in order to sustain our community and to aid the poor and support other works of mercy.

But let's face it ... we lack something that the first Christians had. They seem to have had a greater enthusiasm and a more visible commitment to the faith and to each other. They just seemed more excited and joyful. Perhaps it's because this was the generation for whom the foundational events of Christianity were still current events ... or at least recent history.

They were the generation that condemned and crucified Jesus, the Son of God. They were the generation that experienced the Resurrection and Pentecost. They understood Divine Mercy. God was indeed compassionate toward world of sinners. They repented of their sins and found real hope in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps two-thousand years later, in a world still beset with suffering, it is hard for us to believe as strongly in the mercy of God. People all around the world have been battered by natural disasters. Worse yet are the disasters and suffering we bring on ourselves: wars, violent civil strife, crime, economic hardships, cruelty, addictions, broken relationships, ... the list goes on and on. Sometimes it seems like we just can't suffer enough.

But as I just said, life has been hard in every age. Peter told his readers that they would have to suffer through trials. So I think it is likely that we have lost a sense of wonder of God's mercy. Maybe we have forgotten what it looks like.



There is a movie called "Tender Mercies". It's almost thirty years old now. Janet and I saw it when it first came out. Over the years we've probably watched it half-a-dozen times. It is a movie about mercy and grace and the redemptive power of love in the midst of quiet human suffering and personal tragedy. It is a beautiful film.

It's the story of Mac Sledge, an alcoholic drifter who was once a famous songwriter. He is divorced, broke, and stranded in a small motel gas station on a highway in the lonely flatlands of Texas. The place is owned by Rosa Lee, a young war widow and mother of a young boy called Sonny. Sonny never knew his father who died in Vietnam while Sonny was just a baby.

It is Rosa Lee who sees, in spite of all his failings, the good man in Mac. She gently but firmly helps him on the way toward redemption.

St. Paul said, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Just so, it is through Rosa Lee that God reaches out to Mac. But there is more to it than that.

Rosa Lee is lonely. She is stoic, sure of her faith in God, but there is a sadness about her.

Sonny is a good boy, but he needs a father. He is another lost soul with questions no one can answer. Who was my father? What kind of man was he? How did my father die? Why did he die?

God's grace and mercy flows gently out of each one of them in the course of the movie.

Mac receives it even from strangers: when he begins to go to church with Rosa Lee and Sonny; in the young men who encourage him to write songs and sing again.

Mercy and grace come to them in the usual way as well. Both Sonny and Mac are baptized. On the ride home from church, Sonny asked Mac, now his step-dad, if he felt any different now that he was baptized. "No," said Mac, "not yet."

But it wasn't true. Mac's suffering wasn't over, yet in the midst of it, Mac found the strength to stay sober and deal with his grief.

And Sonny no longer asked questions. He didn't need to, because he had a good father.

And the lonely sadness left Rosa Lee.

In a world still fraught with suffering, hope replaced despair, loving compassion eased the pain of grief. They had found the tender mercy of God and it changed their lives.

That is what divine mercy looks like today, just as it did two thousand years ago.



Today is Divine Mercy Sunday, so designated a few years ago by Pope John Paul II, who was beatified this morning.

Although I don't recall all his reasons for making that declaration, he too must have believed that we had lost some sense of wonder and appreciation of God's loving mercy.

Perhaps the best way to rekindle your wonder in divine mercy is to be reconciled to God through the Sacrament. Believe the words of Jesus to the apostles: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you ... Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them."

Imagine a good priest quietly waiting for you in the confessional, because in his love for Jesus, he desires to do what he was told: forgive sins. God's mercy isn't often dramatic, but it is so powerful.

But the sacrament alone isn't sufficient for the Christian life. It's only foundational. You must share the mercy you have received: consoling, comforting, forgiving, and patiently forbearing.

Seek out and accept God's mercy. Share the mercy you receive. Watch for signs of mercy working through the lives of others. These are the ways we can recapture the excitement and passion of those first Christians.