

Word of Life
February 2021

Show forgiveness

“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:36)

The evangelist Luke liked to use the word “mercy” to emphasize the greatness of God’s love.

It could be said that in sacred scripture, this word expresses the maternal aspect of God’s love. It describes how he cares for his creatures, raises them up, consoles them and never tires of welcoming them.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah, the Lord promised his people, “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem (Is 66:13).”

Mercy is an attribute that is also recognized and proclaimed by Islamic tradition. Among the 99 Beautiful Names of God, those most frequently used by Muslims are the “Most Merciful” and the “Most Clement.”

This passage from the Gospel describes Jesus making a bold and challenging proposal in front of crowds who had come from both nearby and distant areas and towns. He tells everyone to imitate God the Father, precisely in this merciful love.

This may seem an impossible and unattainable goal!

“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

From the perspective of the Gospel, if we want to imitate the Father, we should follow Jesus every day and learn from him to be the first to love. This is what God himself always does with us.

This is the spiritual experience described by the Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945):

“Every day the Christian community sings, ‘I have received mercy.’ I also received this gift when I had closed my heart to God; when I was lost and

could not find my way back. It was then that the word of the Lord came to meet me.

“I understood that he loves me. Jesus found me: he was close to me, he alone. He comforted me, he forgave all my errors and did not blame me for evil. When I was his enemy and did not keep his commandments, he treated me like a friend.

“I find it hard to understand why the Lord loves me so, why I am so dear to him. I cannot understand how he wanted and succeeded in winning over my heart with his love. I can only say, ‘I have received mercy.’”ⁱ

“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

This passage invites us to bring about a dramatic change in our lives. Every time we meet with a situation that could leave us feeling offended, instead of adopting an attitude of rejection, irrefutable judgment and revenge, we can choose to show forgiveness and mercy.

It is not so much a matter of doing this out of a sense of duty but rather of accepting Jesus’ invitation to pass from the death of selfishness to the true life of communion. We will make the joyful discovery that we have received the same DNA as the Father, who does not definitively condemn anyone but gives everyone a second chance, opening horizons of hope.

This choice will also allow us to prepare the ground for fraternal relationships from which a community can develop that is oriented towards peaceful and constructive coexistence.

“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

This is what Focolare founder, Chiara Lubich, suggested in a commentary in November 2000, when meditating on the passage from Matthew 5:7 about the happiness of those who practice mercy:

“The theme of mercy and forgiveness pervades the whole Gospel ... And mercy is precisely the ultimate expression of love, of charity — the one that fulfills it and makes it perfect.

“Let us therefore try to live this love for others in the form of mercy in all our relationships! Mercy is a love that knows how to welcome every neighbor, especially the poorest and most in need. It is a love that does not measure. It is abundant, universal and concrete, a love that tends to generate reciprocity, which is the ultimate goal of mercy.

“Without it, there would only be justice, which serves to create equality but not fraternity.

“Even if it seems difficult and daring, let us ask ourselves, in front of every neighbor, ‘How would this person’s mother behave toward him or her?’ It is a thought that will help us to understand and live according to the heart of God.”

Letizia Magri

Next month:

“Make me know your ways, O Lord: teach me your paths” (Ps 25:4).

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “La Fragilita’ del Male,” 23 Jan 1938, Piemme: 2015.