

## Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy:

# God's Message of Mercy

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Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon  
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**I**n introducing the Holy Year of Mercy Pope Francis said, ***“How much I desire that the year to come will be steeped in mercy, so that we can go out to every man and woman, bringing the good news and tenderness of God.”***

From this statement we see that there are two things that should happen: that we become “steeped” in mercy and that we go out and “share” that mercy with others. In order for all of this to happen, we need to become familiar with God’s mercy. Since it is God’s mercy that we are dealing with, it is of primary importance that we learn from God what God’s mercy is all about.

In the book of Exodus (34:6-7) God shares God’s name with Moses. “A God merciful and gracious”: merciful is related to the word “womb” and speaks of the kind of positive inclination a mother had towards her child – a womb-like mother



love. This is the kind of love God has for the covenant partners. “Gracious” refers to a completely gratuitous positive inclination. It is given without cause or warrant; it is unmerited favour. We are led to think of God’s love as unconditional love for us.

A God “slow to anger”: God is reluctant to rain down divine wrath on those who violated the covenant relationship. God is patient.

## *Hesed = Divine Grace and Mercy*

**A** God “abounding in steadfast love – ‘hesed’” affirms that God has a great capacity and resolve to remain loyal in his love. In this context it suggests that God will “put up with a great deal” because of God’s own powerful resolve to sustain the covenant even when that partner reneges (Isaiah 54:7-8). Faithfulness” bears witness to God’s complete reliability. “Keeping steadfast love – ‘hesed’”, affirms that God’s steadfast love continues to operate for a long time and for a host of subjects. “Forgiving” literally means “to lift”; here it means to relieve the covenant violators of the burden of their violation.

In a few instances the word ‘hesed’ has been noted. This is the most important expression for understanding mercy in the Hebrew language. It means unmerited loving, kindness, friendliness, favour, and also divine grace and mercy. ‘Hesed’ goes beyond mere emotions and grief at human deprivation, meaning God’s free and gracious turning to the human person with care. It designates an ongoing attitude and posture, a reality of relationship rather than a single action. Applied to God, it expresses an unexpected and unmerited gift of God’s grace; God’s unconditional love for humans – unmerited, undeserved,

unearned. All of this exceeds normal experience and surpasses human imagination and thought.

The high point of God’s mercy in the Old Testament is found in the prophet Hosea chapter 11 with special emphasis on verses 8-9. Pope Benedict, in the encyclical “God is Love” # 10, speaks of this reality saying: “God’s passionate love for humanity is at the same time a forgiving love. It is so great that it turns God against himself; his love against his justice. Here Christians can see a dim prefigurement of the mystery of the cross – so great is God’s love for humans that he follows them even unto death, and so reconciles justice and love”.

**T**his message of God’s ‘hesed’ (mercy) is something touching the mystery of God, something which is beyond human thought. Humans can have knowledge of this mystery only through God’s revelation. In the Prophet Hosea God explains this reality by saying, “for I am God and no mortal”. What this is saying is that God’s holiness, God’s being totally other, is revealed in God’s mercy. Mercy is the expression of God’s divine essence, of God being God.

**T** This message is beautifully summed up in the Prophet Isaiah:

“For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord your redeemer... For the mountains may depart and the hills be moved, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.”

*(Is. 7:8-9)*

**I**n introducing the Holy Year of Mercy Pope Francis affirms:

“Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith. Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him. The Father, rich in mercy, after having revealed his name to Moses (Ex 34:6)... has never ceased to show, in various ways throughout history, his divine nature... Jesus of Nazareth, by his words, his actions, and his entire person, reveals the mercy of God.”

*(MV #1)*

In the beginning the Gospels speak of Jesus’ mission; and then, as they develop, how Jesus fulfills the mission. A quick overview of the Gospels indicates that the high point of Jesus’ messianic mission is caring for: those in need of help the poor, the little ones, those who appear unimportant to mortal eyes.

What is seen in all of this is that Jesus not only proclaimed the Father’s mercy, he lived it himself. Jesus ministered to the hungry, the sick, those plagued by evil spirits. He is moved with compassion when he meets the leper (Mk 1:41), he has compassion for the many who are sick (Mt 14:14), for the people who are hungry (Mt 15:32), he has compassion for those who are like sheep without a shepherd (Mt 6:34). In the great last judgement speech Jesus identifies with the poor, the hungry, the miserable and the persecuted (Mt 25:31-46).



Even on the cross he pardoned the repentant thief and prayed for those who had brought him to the cross (Lk 23:34-43).

## *Our Father...*

**W**hat is new in Jesus' message and distinguishes it from the Old Testament is that Jesus proclaims God's mercy "for all"; and in an "ultimate way", Jesus opens up access to God, not just for a few righteous persons but for all. There is room in God's kingdom for all, no one is excluded.

Jesus addresses sinners in a special way; they are the spiritually poor. Jesus eats with them (Mk 2:13-17), is counted as a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Lk 7:34); in the house of Simon he shows mercy to a prostitute (Lk 7:36). We see Jesus' compassion in a very unique way with regards to the widow of Nain (Lk 36:13). Any parent who has had to bury a child knows well the pain of the mother.

Parents are not wired to bury their children. The Son of God has compassion for her. He hurts with her. He heals her pain.

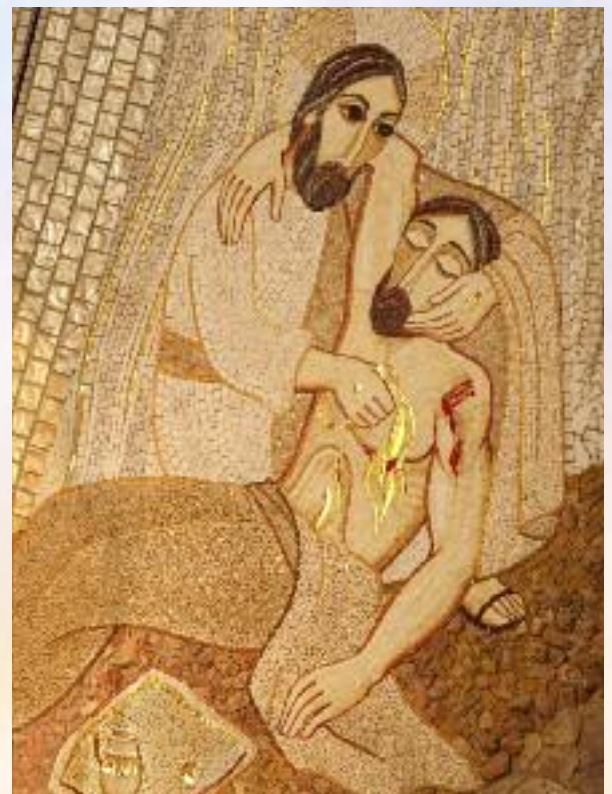
**T**here is something that occupies the centre of Jesus' message and that is the message about God as "our Father." This is an explicit teaching of Jesus. Some people have difficulty with the exclusivity of the title. What is important is that we try to move beyond the possibility of exclusivity and come to the real meaning of the title. The *Our Father* expresses the innermost core of our understanding of God and of our relationship to God. It tells us that we stand in a personal relationship to a divine person who knows us, hears us, bears us up, and loves us. We may cast our cares on him, for just as he knows how to care for the birds of the heaven and for the flowers and grass in the field, so does he all the more know what human beings need (Mt 6:25ff). He himself cares for the sparrows and has counted the hairs over our heads (Mt 10:2ff).

*“Be merciful as your  
Father is merciful...”*

He is our Father, and is the Father of all human beings. All are his children; all are his sons and daughters. He lets his sun shine on the bad and the good, and lets his rain fall on the just and the unjust (Mt 11:25). Our Father in heaven is not distant from any of us. He is the Father of both heaven and earth (Mt 11:25). The Father’s hand may be detected in everything; all know they are secure with him in every situation. All may call upon him as “Our Father” in every need. The Gospel of Luke put Jesus’ message together in a nutshell: “Be merciful and just as your Father is merciful” (6:36). For Luke, mercy is the perfection of God’s essence.

**J**esus explains for us the message of the Fathers’ mercy most beautifully in his parables. The parables Jesus told are described as “stories that reveal the nature of God as Jesus know him.” A few of these parables have been burned into the memory of humankind and have become truly proverbial; two in particular: The Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), and the merciful Father (Lk 15:11-32).

In the Parable of The Good Samaritan Jesus presents us with a Samaritan as a model of mercy. The Samaritans were considered as outcasts in Jewish society, unorthodox, half-heathens. While the priests and the Levites pass by the victim on the road, the Samaritan is moved with compassion for the wounded person. He forgets the business matter for which he was underway, bends down in the dirt, provides first aid, tends to the victim’s wounds, places him on his animal and takes him to the inn keeper, and generously pays the innkeeper in advance. The Samaritan is moved with compassion, the same emotion that overwhelmed Jesus when he saw the widow of Nain and the leper.



**W**hen the lawyer answered Jesus as to who had acted as a neighbour, Jesus said: “Go and do likewise.”

## *“The Parable of the Merciful Father...”*

The Parable of the Prodigal Son, which gradually becomes known as the Prodigal Sons – as both sons were prodigal – in fact the elder more so than the younger – finally became known as the Parable of the Merciful Father. The reason Jesus told the parable was to tell us about the Father.

Looking at the parable more closely, what becomes readily apparent is the pain of the Father. The younger son wishes the Father dead so that the estate can be divided. He then leaves home; a denial or rejection of his heritage, the tradition and values given him. In a foreign country he ends up feeding pigs, the son of a good Jewish Father. In the end it is physical hunger that motivates him to return home.

The Father is patiently and painfully waiting for the son’s return. The Father, who does not break the crushed reed nor quench the wavering flame, goes out to meet the boy.



We see here it is the Father who takes the initiative. As always, it is God who takes the initiative. St. John reminds us that “we love because he first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19). The Father interrupts the boy’s confession. The Father embraces his son and welcomes him back royally with a celebration.

The elder son has also left home. While he remains home physically, his anger, resentment, forgiveness, and spirit of revenge have taken him far from home. He can’t even call his younger brother his brother: “This son of yours.” But the Father goes out to meet him and pleads with him to come and join the celebration.

**W**e see in this parable how mercy affects relationships. It is not sin that is forgiven, but the sinner. It is not things that are affected by mercy, but persons.

Jesus tell the parable to tell us about the Father. What becomes so apparent in the parable is that reconciliation –

*“... mercy is  
God’s initiative,  
it is God’s gift...”*

mercy – is God’s initiative, it is God’s gift. Thomas Merton speaks of God as

**“mercy within mercy within mercy.”**

St Bernard said:  
**“The measure of God’s mercy is without measure.”**

On the twenty-sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time, the opening prayer of Mass which is celebrated throughout the world, the Church prays: **“O God, who show your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy.”**

**P**ope Francis reminds us that God’s mercy is infinite; God will never tire of being merciful towards everyone, if only we do not tire of asking for mercy. God forsakes no person and lets none fall.

The parable serves to show Jesus’ own behaviour as an expression of the behaviour of the Father in heaven. Jesus wants to say to us that our story is told in the story of the younger son.

**W**e too must repent. But have no fear as God himself comes to meet us and takes us in his arms. He does not humiliate us; rather he gives us back our dignity as his children.

**W**e are celebrating the Holy Year of Mercy to reflect more deeply on God's mercy, to see how we benefit from and receive that mercy in our lives – how we are steeped in mercy, and also to remind ourselves of our call to show that mercy to our sisters and brothers in our daily lives: “Be merciful just as your Father is merciful.” (Lk 6:36)



*“God’s Message of Mercy” was written by Bishop Emeritus Gerald Wiesner, OMI, as part of the work of a Holy Year of Mercy Committee in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon, 123 Nelson Road, Saskatoon, SK. S7S 1H1, (306) 242-1500, [www.saskatoonrcdiocese.com](http://www.saskatoonrcdiocese.com)*

*(Images are from [www.123rf.com](http://www.123rf.com) including the mosaic of the Good Samaritan by Pater Rupnik on page 5, and the painting of the Return of the Prodigal Son by Josef Kastner on page 6.)*