

A Church That Looks and Sounds Like Mercy

What would our church look like if we were truly merciful? It would look like we are trying to be the living representation of the God described in the psalms as “steadfast,” “faithfully devoted,” “merciful,” filled with the kind of compassionate love that a mother shows for a child in her womb. When we begin to see that being merciful and compassionate is what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God, when we recognize our dignity—and the dignity of all we meet—as sons and daughters of God, then we can begin to find ways to express and share this dignity.

We would look for ways to live like God, not just for some special occasion or only for a special Year of Mercy, but every day, in ordinary circumstances, with the people we meet who are in need of a kind of “daily” mercy, no matter how surprising or unexpected that may be for some people. Daily mercy is not something widely available in our world; all too often, we lean toward vengeance and punishment. Being merciful day after day is hard work. It takes practice, and it requires honesty. We have to be able to see ourselves as we are before we can experience the true God and our brothers and sisters as they are. We fail, and we are sinners, but we are sinners who are loved and who are capable of love.

Sadly, sometimes the hardest place to be merciful is with the people around us—our families, the people with whom we work, the people we know whom we consider pests, cranks, or just annoying.

Our worship not only calls us to be merciful this way; it

teaches us how to do it and helps us to practice such mercy. Consider this: Our Liturgy begins with a cry for mercy in the “*Kyrie*”; our response to the proclamation of God’s Word is a prayer for mercy for the Church and for all the world’s needy. Before we approach the altar to share sacramental Communion, we call to the Lamb of God for mercy. Mercy frequently takes the shape of service, so we are called to share our gifts in service to the worshipping assembly as ministers of our common prayer. Mercy often means letting others go before us, stepping aside so others may recognize and exercise their gifts.

We need to come to worship and to meetings with other people with an expectation that we will encounter the Risen Christ in those we meet and in those we serve. It’s hard to do. It’s hard to believe that Christ is present in the child crying in the pew behind us or kicking the back of the pew, in the person we have to talk to who speaks a language other than our own, in the homeless woman in the back pew who is several weeks away from her last bath.

In the end, though, this is the only way we will meet Christ: in and through other people. Our meetings with other people reveal us to ourselves and help us recognize our need for Christ. They also reveal, through the love that other people show us, the presence of Christ in ourselves. It is that presence that gives us the strength to find Christ in others and to share with them the mercy shown to us. Sometimes we have to step out of our comfort zone, called by divine mercy, but that move will be a key step in our journey of faith.

