

Introduction: Creating Circles & Culture of Mercy

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Since September 2019, we have been exploring dimensions of Mercy Global Presence, beginning first with “global,” moving to “mercy,” and finally to “presence.” Over the past three months, we have begun to braid all the threads together with themes centered on contemplative seeing, a compassionate heart, and mercying. We now conclude all four segments and sixteen themes with a focus on our final theme, “Creating Circles of Mercy and a Culture of Mercy.”

Before we begin to reflect on this final theme, let us recall some of the diverse voices and images from last month’s theme of “Mercying.” In the Introduction, we saw two definitions of “mercying,” one from the book of Micah, “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8), and one from the Hindu holy books with the Sanskrit word for mercy दया (daya) meaning, “suffering in the suffering of all beings.” The theologian, Mary Sullivan rsm, used images from the Gospels to add depth to these definitions, “We are to be the mat carriers of the paralyzed, the coffin bearers in Nain, the arms on which the lame lean, those who listen to the mute and cry out for wider human listening, those who eat with and try to influence the tax collectors.”

The artist’s image this month came from the ceramic works of artist Gerald Squires which recognize those who journey in mercy with the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland: (i) the water pitcher which since 1994 is part of Mercy heritage at Baggot Street – it depicts the fishing history of the island and the Basilica Cathedral, built by Bishop Michael Fleming who negotiated with Catherine McAuley to establish the first foundation of Mercy in “the new world”; (ii) a set of panels depicting the history of St. Clare’s Mercy Hospital ending with the words from Mary’s *Magificat*, God’s mercy is from generation to generation, and (iii) a set of panels depicting the words of Matthew 25 (“I was hungry. . .”) and hanging in the dining room of The Gathering Place in St. John’s NL.

The global thinker, Elizabeth MacNeal, compared “mercying” to “the crinkled pages of a book as you uncover a character’s story or the car windows down on a beautiful summer day. It feels like a moment when your body and your soul are so in sync. But unlike these moments ‘mercying’ is not fleeting. It’s here to stay, always moving, always fluid.” Theresia Tina rsm brought this understanding into the reality of this time in Papua New Guinea, “The pandemic has increased the rates of crime and hunger in most towns of our country. ‘Mercying’ is a present word of action but, in such situations, ‘Mercying’ is at risk, and a huge challenge and often becomes only a feeling at this time of the global pandemic.”

This month’s grassroots ministers were the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland in Peru. A video collage illustrated their diverse ministries in responding to the cry of Earth and the cry of the Poor. At the end of the video are the summary words, “We are women of the resurrection... ..where there are difficulties, we see opportunities ...where there are obstacles, we see challenges ...where there are impossible situations, we see possibilities We are women of hope, life, and compassion! We are women of mercy!”

Jean Adam rsm and Carolyn McWatters rsm led us in a reflective prayer, reminding us that “Mercying has a rhythm of breathing in, breathing out. Breathing in the mercy of God for us, and breathing out the mercy of God to the world. In our contemplative prayer we are being transformed into Mercy, and it spills forth into our relationships with all creation.” We were challenged in *Musing for the Journey*, “In all the voices – theologian, artist, distinct voice, scientist, minister, global thinker, prayer maker – which voice speaks most passionately to me and us about mercying?”

Creating Circles of Mercy

The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” (Lk 10:34-35). For the past three themes, Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan has been guiding us in our global contemplation as we bring together the new images, the new theology, the new spirituality, and the new sense of ministry which are emerging among us in our Mercy family.

Having truly seen the injured man, the Samaritan’s heart is filled with compassion, and he reaches out to heal him. His first response is not to do it alone but to create circles of mercy. The first circle he creates comes from Earth with the oil and wine, the fruits of the Earth. He then uses his animal to carry the injured man and the road to take him to the inn. The built environment of the inn also becomes part of that circle of mercy. And, finally, he trusts the inn keeper to continue the healing when he left.

Think of the many circles of mercy in which you have participated over the years. There is wonder in seeing the faces of the many women, men, and children with whom you have journeyed, living mercy and acting in mercy! Sometimes these were circles of mercy in ministry, sometimes in prayer, sometimes in community living, sometimes in family, sometimes in study, sometimes in joy, sometimes in sorrow. Think of those circles of mercy you have shared with hills, rivers, ocean, rocks, birds, butterflies, flowers, trees, rainbows, waterfalls, sunrises, sunsets, rain, snow, sunlight, and shadows. And remember the circles which include holy built spaces, possibly a classroom or chapel or nursing unit or kitchen or office or planted garden or special prayer space.

All these circles of mercy have the same qualities. They are circles in which you enjoy and share mercy, God’s mercy. They are circles in which every being – human or other-than-human – matters. They are circles in which the Spirit is present, abundantly pouring out compassion in the midst of pain and joy in the midst of hope. They are circles in which inclusion and diversity welcome and support each other.

What are the circles of mercy which you help shape today by your very presence? Who joins you in these circles? Whom do you invite – who invites you? Do you welcome a stranger into your circle? Are you invited to circles of mercy which you would never have imagined in the past? In which circles, do you find healing yourself? In which circles, are you a source of healing and compassion? Where are the circles of mercy which you share with Earth? What is the newest circle in which you have been present and which has brought you much joy?

Creating a Culture of Mercy

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’ (Lk 10:35-37). The parable does not end with the mercy-filled ministry of the Good Samaritan. Rather Jesus engages the lawyer in further conversation about what he has learned from the parable. The lawyer, although he is still not able to say aloud that the person is a “Samaritan,” acknowledges that the foreigner is the true neighbour in the story. Then Jesus ends the parable with the daunting words, “Go and do likewise.” Jesus dares us not only to do deeds of mercy, not only to create circles of mercy, but also to shape a culture of mercy.

A culture of mercy endures over time. In the Old Testament, when Moses asks God who God is, God replies, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation” (Ex 34:6-7). God’s name is mercy for all generations. Mary will repeat these words in her *Magnificat*, “God’s mercy is from generation to generation” (Lk 1:50). In Lamentations, we read, “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God’s mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (Lam 3:22-23).

Pope Francis says, “The name of God is mercy.” Made in the image of God who is merciful and gracious (see Gen 1:27), we not only act with mercy but we become mercy. In the letter to the Colossians, we read, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Col 3:12). The founder of the Sisters of Mercy, Catherine McAuley, in the original *Constitutions* for her congregation, named mercy as “the principal path pointed out by Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following Him.”

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare speaks through the voice of Portia and echoes that same sense of the enduring quality of mercy:

The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth the one that gives and the one that takes.

Other faith traditions understand mercy in the same way, permeating all life over time and space. The Buddha teaches, “In separateness lies the world’s great misery, in compassion lies the world’s true strength.” In that same tradition, the Dalai Lama tells us, “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.” In the Muslim tradition, the great thirteenth-century poet Rumi wrote:

in this earth
in this soil
in this pure field
let us not plant any seeds
other than seeds
of compassion and love

In our time, the spiritual teacher, Judy Cannato, in her *Field of Compassion*, calls us to radical transformation. In doing so, she summarizes well the culture of mercy and compassion:

Compassion changes everything. Compassion heals.
Compassion mends the broken and restores what has been lost.
Compassion draws together those who have been estranged
or never even dreamed they were connected.
Compassion pulls us out of ourselves and into the heart of another,
placing us on holy ground where we instinctively take off our shoes
and walk in reverence.
Compassion springs out of vulnerability and triumphs in unity.

And the liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff, in his *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, describes compassion as our response in the covenantal relationship God makes with Earth and all Earth beings (see Gen 9:8-17), “Human beings must feel that they are sons and daughters of the rainbow, those who translate this divine covenant with all the beings existing and living, with new relationships of kindness, compassion, cosmic solidarity, and deep reverence for the mystery that each one bears and reveals.”

In his encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis develops his understanding of a “culture of encounter” which is anointed with mercy:

The word “culture” points to something deeply embedded within a people, its most cherished convictions and its way of life. A people’s “culture” is more than an abstract idea. It has to do with their desires, their interests and ultimately the way they live their lives. To speak of a “culture of encounter” means that we, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone. This becomes an aspiration and a style of life. *Fratelli Tutti*, #216

I ask God “to prepare our hearts to encounter our brothers and sisters, so that we may overcome our differences rooted in political thinking, language, culture and religion. Let us ask God to anoint our whole being with the balm of mercy, which heals the injuries caused by mistakes, misunderstandings and disputes. And let us ask God for the grace to send us forth, in humility and meekness, along the demanding but enriching path of seeking peace.” *Fratelli Tutti*, #254

In these voices, over time and from diverse religious and spiritual traditions, we find an echo of Jesus’ invitation to all of us to “Go and do likewise” – to shape all around us a culture of mercy and compassion, to be clothed in compassion, to walk in the way of mercy as the principal path pointed out by Jesus, to be passionate about encountering others on the path to seeking peace, to live in the image of the One whose name is mercy.

Braiding the Tapestry that is Mercy Global Presence

Literary *métissage* (Spanish *mestizaje*) generates new knowledge through writing and braiding texts and other art forms. It embraces distinct voices, uses different genres, and reclaims many wisdoms. Ecological *métissage* adapts the same blending of diversity with ecological worldviews (Indigenous, scientific, and religious). *Métissage* invites the reader or the listener to pursue many paths through the texts, art forms and worldviews. In this way, it generates new understanding and wisdom about the world and our place in it.

Our sixteen-month experience of Mercy Global Presence has been a visual, literary, and ecological *métissage* as together globally we have embraced distinct voices, used different genres, and reclaimed many wisdoms. In doing so, we have seen “mercy” come alive in new ways for our world and our place in this world.

We are now completing our fourth and last segment which intensifies our *métissage* as it completes the weaving of new patterns through contemplative seeing, a compassionate heart, mercying, and the creating of circles and a culture of mercy. After we have reflected on this last theme in the last segment, we will gather the threads and complete this stage of our *métissage*, naming the new images, the new theologies, the new spiritualities and the new ways of ministering.

During the month of July 2021, the Guiding Team for Mercy Global Presence, working with the coordinators from the twelve Mercy congregations and institutes, will gather the threads of all the diverse voices, regional gatherings, and global contemplation since September 2019. We will forward the gathered and braided threads to the many members of the Mercy family around the globe in a way or ways which become a foundation for the next phase of deepening this Mercy Global Presence.

Together we have created a new weaving of mercy, gathering the threads of our lived experience shining with all the colours and textures of Earth. Through this braiding of differences, may we help transform our post-pandemic world and church so desperately in need of God’s mercy and compassion. May our God of mercy walk with us on our way