



**MERCY
GLOBAL
PRESENCE**

Reflection for Segment Two, Theme One: Faith Traditions and Mercy

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We have concluded our first four-month exploration of Mercy Global Presence, focusing on “global” through the lenses of Cosmos, Earth and integral ecology, people and deep social change, and God incarnate in the Cosmos and in Jesus. We now begin our contemplation of “mercy,” the second dimension of Mercy Global Presence. Over these next four months (from March until June), we will reflect on faith traditions and mercy, mercy and degradation of Earth, mercy and displacement of persons, and new foundations in mercy. Once again, we will invite diverse and distinct voices to call us into this contemplation and to dare us to find anew our passion for mercy.

Mercy and other Faith Traditions

Pope Francis imagines mercy as a way into dialogue with other faith traditions:

I trust that this Jubilee year celebrating the mercy of God will foster an encounter with these religions [Judaism and Islam] and with other noble religious traditions; may it open us to even more fervent dialogue so that we might know and understand one another better; may it eliminate every form of closed-mindedness and disrespect, and drive out every form of violence and discrimination.

Even a brief glimpse tells us that each major faith tradition holds mercy as essential to its life, that mercy requires many words to reflect its depth, that mercy is a name for God, that mercy is one of the qualities of God lived by people every day, and that mercy is integrally connected to creation and to Earth.

Mercy as the Essence of Religion

Mohandas Gandhi told us, “The central teaching of the Hindu religion is that mercy of kindness is the essence of all religion.” The Buddha wrote, “Teach this triple truth to all: a generous heart, kind speech, and a life of service and compassion are the things which renew humanity.” The Jewish Rabbis proclaim, “The Torah begins with mercy and ends with mercy.” Pope Francis echoes this truth, “The pages of the Old Testament are steeped in mercy.” In the *Quran* (7:156), Allah says, “My mercy embraces all things.” In the sacred writings of Sikhism, we read, “Keep your heart content and cherish compassion for all beings; this way alone can your holy vow be fulfilled.”

Words for Mercy in Sacred Writings

The words used for “mercy” in the varied faith traditions reflect the depth of this quality which is of God and is shared with humans and with Earth. Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism use two Sanskrit words for mercy: (i) *dayaa* which is translated as gift, tenderness, compassion, mercy or sympathy; and (ii) *karunaa* which is translated as pity, compassion or tenderness.

In the Hebrew Bible, there are several Hebrew words for mercy, the most common of which are *hesed*, *rahamim*, and *hanan*. *Hesed* describes the covenant love between God and the chosen people and is usually translated in English as steadfast love. “For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, 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 54:10). *Rahamim*, taken from the root word meaning womb, is translated as womb-love, compassion or mercy. “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you” (Is 49:15). Less well known is *hanan*, often translated as grace or favour. “Gracious is the LORD and righteous; our God is merciful” (Ps 116:5).

Four Greek words for “mercy” in the New Testament have their own nuance, each one echoing the Old Testament words: *eleos* usually translated as mercy (comparable to *hesed*), *spilagchna* and *oiktirmos* translated as compassion or pity each one echoing *rahamim*, and *charis* translated as grace or favour (echoing *hanan*). We recognize *eleos* as the root word used in *Kyrie Eleison* (*Lord, have mercy*) which we pray at the beginning of Mass. For *charis*, the best-known text is from Lk 1:30, “The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.’”

Mercy as a Name for God

So fundamental is mercy that it becomes one of the names for God in almost every faith tradition. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is called “Ha-Rahun” – the Merciful One. “And the people of the Lord Most High offered their prayers before the Merciful One” (Sirach 50:19). Almost every chapter of the Muslim holy book, the *Quran*, begins with the words, “In the name of Allah, the Most Compassionate One, the Most Merciful One.” Sikhism has many names for God, including the most compassionate one, the lord of compassion, and, my favourite, Rahima (the merciful one). In the Christian tradition, we note that Pope Francis’ first book is entitled, *The Name of God Is Mercy*.

Mercying in Faith Traditions

Pope Francis has also invented a new English word to deepen our response as lovers of mercy and doers of mercy. He took his papal motto from the Venerable Bede, *Miserando atque Eligendo*. The last word of the motto means “choosing,” but it is not so easy to translate the first word *Miserando*. Therefore, Pope Francis created a new word for us, “mercying,” which invites us not just to be merciful, but to be mercy, to forgive the unforgivable, to look tenderly upon the unappealing and the troublesome, to be compassionate to the ungrateful.

Each faith tradition repeats this passion for mercying. In Sanskrit, the word for “mercy,” *dayaa*, originally meant “suffering in the suffering of all beings.” Gandhi, says “It ill becomes us to invoke in our daily prayers the blessings of God, the Compassionate, if we in turn will not practice elementary compassion toward our fellow creatures.” In Buddhism, the Bodhisattva Kwan Yin is a spiritual figure associated with compassion. Her name means *One Who Hears the Cry of the World*. The prophet Micah brings mercy and justice together in the response to how we live in God’s likeness, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness (*hesed*), and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). In 2 Cor 4:1, Paul reminds us, “Since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.”

Mercy and Creation

Mercy and creation are woven together in all the faith traditions. The beautiful Psalm 136 (vv. 2-9) re-tells the creation story:

O give thanks to the God of gods, for God's steadfast love (mercy, *hesed*) endures for ever.
 who alone does great wonders, for God's mercy endures for ever.
 who by understanding made the heavens, for God's mercy endures for ever.
 who spread out the earth on the waters, for God's mercy endures for ever.
 who made the great lights, for God's mercy endures for ever.
 the sun to rule over the day, for God's mercy endures for ever.
 the moon and stars to rule over the night, for God's mercy endures for ever.

The Muslim spiritual master, Ibn Arabi, summarizes this creation story: "God has 'mercified' the universe into being." It is no accident that the phrase "the Lord of the worlds" is embedded in the heart of the description of God in the Quran, "In the name of Allah, the Most Compassionate One, the Most Merciful One, Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds, the Most Compassionate One, the Most Merciful One." The Arabic word for "worlds" (*'Alameen*) includes the world of humans, of spirits, of animals, of birds, and nations found on land and in the sea, all sustained every day by the creating God.

Let Us Reflect

As we prepare now to deepen our contemplation of mercy through the beauty of diverse faith traditions, I invite each one of us to reflect on these questions:

- How is mercy essential in my life?
- With what words do I imagine mercy?
- What mercy-name for God do I use most often?
- In this past week, how and where have I been mercying?
- During this past week, when did Earth show me mercy?

