

MERCY AND ITS WORKS:

IF THINGS FALL APART, CAN THEY BE PUT RIGHT?

MARGARET A. FARLEY, R.S.M.

*Introduction*

I borrow here the title of one of Africa's greatest novels, *Things Fall Apart*, written by one of its greatest novelists, Chinua Achebe.<sup>1</sup> I do so because these are the words that have come to my mind all too frequently in recent months and even years: "Things fall apart." Though set in different times and places from our own, this novel has long offered a paradigm for seemingly intractable conflicts between human individuals and within human societies. In our own times and places, we hear the stories of shattered lives, vicious assaults, enmities in all spheres of human interaction. Narratives like these are intimately accessible to us in a globalized world—whether focused on economic and environmental injustices, racial and ethnic fears, vast inequalities of all kinds, unending forms of violence and oppression. These narratives constitute a kind of "book of pain"—one that we must continue to read, and to read in the light of, or against, historical and religious old and new chapters.

This year we live *into* a designated extraordinary year of Jubilee. Like the Jewish Sabbath years, a Jubilee year is to be a year of spiritual renewal, with a reawakening of compassion and peacefulness within human society. It is a year in which, if things have fallen apart, they are to be put right—for example, by letting the land lie fallow for a year, freeing those enslaved because of poverty, rectifying injustices that have crept into the social arrangements of our time. It is a year, above all, during which we are simply to stop long enough, as on an extended Sabbath, to remind ourselves that all things belong ultimately to God, who calls us to help in putting things right, no matter our own complicity in their "falling apart." It is a year not only of "stopping" but of acting, in response to the divine command to discern the ways ahead of us marked by justice and mercy.

But is this possible? Do we not experience the winds of our time blowing ineluctably in directions that are the opposite of what is called for in a Jubilee year? Not long ago, I heard someone say: "World order has been broken." And so it seems to me; it is broken in significant respects. We have wars within wars and ever expanding new killing fields; economic chasms between some parts of the world and others, despite the promises of global unity; civil unrest around the globe; millions displaced and homeless; illegal occupation of stolen lands; terrorism practiced as a virtue; kidnaping and enslavement of children; rape used not only as a weapon of war but as fodder for pseudo-religious rituals; conscription of women and girls into the front lines of suicide bombers; murder of civilians by anonymous drones; countless crimes against humanity aimed especially at the most vulnerable of persons and groups. Mercy and justice seem to recede into the darkness.

If world order is broken, it could be said that our own national order is not far behind, not far from falling apart in important ways. Mirroring the loss of world order is, for example, our tolerance of what has been called a "gun epidemic" in our nation.

---

<sup>1</sup>Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).

We harbor guns in our neighborhoods that are weapons of war, designed to kill with brutal efficiency and speed. Deliberately marketed for vigilante use and even insurrection, they can just as well be used for deranged killings of school children. We have not managed, as a nation, to outlaw these kinds of guns, even as bodies continue to pile up, and the tears of the living pour forth unchecked.

But our nation knows other forms of threats and actual brokenness, some of them greater than manufactured weapons or even terrorists from abroad. For many years, we have fostered serious polarization among our people and within our institutions. The drawing of hard economic and social lines among us has yielded a deepening national dysfunction. The roots of polarization and dysfunction are complex, but they blossom into forms of anger and hatred, exclusions and scapegoating—whether of the wealthy or the poor, immigrants or Wall Street bankers, national leaders or those on the outside offering simplistic analyses of “big government.” Respect for other persons erodes as individuals are attacked by personal insults thrown at them, and longstanding group grievances continue to fester. Attitudes reminiscent of Max Scheler’s concept of *ressentiment* (or “resentment”) grow among us, with cumulative feelings of impotence, envy, repressed rage, and desire for revenge.<sup>2</sup> In an election year, these developments among us all too easily awaken a yearning for leaders who promise “greatness” to match their own (real or imagined); prosperity if only the people will follow the loudest voice; permission to “punch others in the face” because they have been judged to deserve it; freedom to demean all so-called “losers”; and access to the kind of power that proclaims and sustains its own treasured forms of dominance.<sup>3</sup>

Even in the Roman Catholic church, there is significant evidence of things falling apart. Just about everyone, including Pope Francis, speaks of the church as a “wounded church:” its children are injured; some of its leaders have been irresponsible; and many of its members are on the brink of bitter disillusionment. Never before, perhaps, has the situation in the Roman Catholic church so closely paralleled the situation in the sixteenth century, just prior to the Protestant Reformation—a situation marked by scandals of sexual immorality, failures in humility and honesty on the part of church leaders, and fear of new insights in developments of doctrine. Today, Catholic co-believers are not so interested in starting a new church, but they do walk away, drift away, in ever sobering numbers. The Spirit, we believe, is within the church, and God will not fail to assist God’s servants. But what kind of cleansing, forgiveness, and new life there is to come, is not yet completely clear.

The question I want to pose, however, is whether a year of Jubilee can really help to remedy what is broken in the orders of the world, our nation, our church. This is a rhetorical question, of course, since I am not asking whether or how all of the world’s suffering can be wiped away by our living a Jubilee year. Nor am I asking for formulas or specific strategies that we might develop in the face of our own and others’ profound human limitations. We know perhaps too much about the almost impossibility of living together in deep and lasting peace, the futility of trying to

---

<sup>2</sup>See Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, ed. Lewis A. Coser, trans. William W. Holdheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1972).

<sup>3</sup>Some of this analysis is taken from Jeff Sharlet, “Bully Pulpit,” *The New York Times Magazine* (April 17, 2016): 40-47.

erase all human greed, the systemic evils that lie hidden behind business as usual. I take it that Pope Francis, in declaring a Jubilee year, was not naively suggesting a utopian program that could somehow keep everything from falling apart. He asked simply for a year focused on mercy, a holy year of forgiveness he calls it, a focused way of understanding the words of Jesus: Be you merciful as God is merciful (Luke 6:36). His *hope* for the Jubilee year, however, is nothing short of a conversion of our minds and hearts by daring to take on the suffering of others, helping to put things right, and freeing and being freed by the mercy of God. Our path to conversion is not only to survey our seemingly infinite problems, but to see clearly that the ways of breaking orders and hearts are the opposite of the ways of mercy.

### *Mercy's Works and Ways*

I turn then to explore the works and ways of mercy—both human and divine. I will attempt to do this through three lenses: (1) Mercy as a Form of Love; (2) Justice and the Shape of Mercy; (3) A Work of Mercy Particularly relevant for the Twenty-first Century.

#### *Mercy as a Form of Love*

I begin with a caveat: Mercy has multiple meanings, across world religions, generations of philosophical schools, and even legal frameworks. Despite sometimes contradictory interpretations and confusing practices, most religions have a central place for pondering and valuing some notion of “mercy” needed for individuals and groups. I cannot pursue these here. Rather, my focus will be largely on Christian understandings of mercy. Similarly, I make no effort here to sort out multiple general philosophical and psychological terms closely related to “mercy”—such as pity, sympathy, compassion, and empathy. These are important, but here again, I am primarily focused on Christian theological and ethical meanings for mercy, both human and divine.<sup>4</sup>

In many of its key Christian usages, mercy is, at its core, love for those who are in need. It is the *form* that love takes when the beloved is in need. If mercy is love for the beloved in need, then it is a love that tries to alleviate the need as well as to share the burdens and the sufferings of the beloved. Hence, we cannot understand mercy unless we understand need—suffering, pain, and the misery of the ones we love—and unless we take these understandings into our hearts (*miser cordia*).

To repeat: mercy is love for those who are in need. It is the *gift* that fulfills, or tries to fulfill, the need of one in misery: as bread is mercy to the hungry, warmth to someone who is cold, a word of comfort to the lonely and abandoned. Mercy is also the *action of giving* the gift, the action, for example, of preparing nourishing food, finding shelter for the homeless, tendering forgiveness to those in need of it. Mercy is, therefore, love, gift, and giving, but the gift and the giving are expressions of the love, and they gain all of their meaning from the love. Since mercy is first of all love

---

<sup>4</sup> See my efforts, however, at a wider study of religious and philosophical meanings for compassion in Margaret A. Farley, *Compassionate Respect* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), 45–65.

for one in need, and all that mercy gives is an expression of that love, then love itself is the most needed of all mercies, without which we are all most miserable.<sup>5</sup>

I use the term mercy, however, not only for intimate relationships, but for a broad set of human and nonhuman needs. Where the range of miseries or needs is understood too narrowly, the range of mercy will be restricted as well. There is a sense in which all creation is actually a needing creation. Misery does not always take the form of dramatic bodily or psychological pain. *To be* in need can be to lack something even if one is unaware of the need. Someone who has never experienced awe in the face of beauty or learned to desire wisdom is missing something—whether knowingly or not. There is even a kind of need that persists after it is met, after what is missing or broken is filled and made whole. This is the kind of need that permeates created being; it is the kind of need that makes a creature precisely a creature. It is a subsistent need, the need to be held in being as well as in wellbeing, constantly responded to by divine mercy, and participated in by human mercy.

To know the length and breadth and height of the mercy of God is to see it stretch from one end of the universe to the other, from past to future, from the edge of nothingness to the heights of creation, down to the very depths of every being. It is in the love and power of such mercy that human mercy shares. There is a problem, of course. That is, if God is all mercy, then we must admit that there is a dread mercy as well as a joyful one. God is light, and nothing but light can come from light. God is all love, and nothing but love can come from love. Yet there is a darkness beyond which our minds cannot penetrate. Illumined by faith, we may catch a glimpse of the light that appears as darkness, and see that there is a misery that is itself mercy.

I have maintained elsewhere that every great love is a crucified love, and every great joy may be a crucified joy.<sup>6</sup> I am willing also to say here that all genuine mercy is in some way a crucified mercy, that is, mercy aimed at goodness and light, willing to walk in the way of the cross; mercy accepting a cup of suffering that is first a cup of love; mercy carrying in its heart a desire to mend what is broken and sustain what has been healed; mercy that is other-centered and capable of deeper and deeper conversion of heart. By itself, human mercy is not capable of the fullest forms of mercy, but it can partake of and participate in the mercy of God revealed in the mercy of Jesus Christ—a mercy that empties itself, shares all burdens, and yearns ultimately for the healing of all creation.

---

<sup>5</sup> Much of what I am describing here about mercy and misery adopts a kind of phenomena-logical analysis which I have used before—in, e.g., *Compassionate Respect*, but also in essays such as Margaret A. Farley, “One Thing Only is Necessary,” *MAST JOURNAL* vol. 2 (Summer, 1992): 17–23.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Margaret A. Farley, *Changing the Questions: Explorations in Christian Ethics* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 210–15.

*Justice and the Shape of Mercy*

I turn now to a second lens for the understanding of mercy—the relationship between mercy and justice. I have probed this kind of relationship twice before in my analyses of similar relationships—that is, relationships between compassion and respect, and between love and justice.<sup>7</sup> In each case, I have encountered views of these relationships that aim to distinguish between the poles of the relations. For example, love and justice are often seen as hierarchical, love being greater than justice, beyond justice. On the other hand, love and justice have been seen as opposed to each other because the claims of justice are seen as more absolute than the claims of love. Similarly, in considerations of mercy and justice, it is frequently said that justice goes only so far, but mercy goes farther (the extra mile) in responding to suffering. I appreciate these views of the relationships, but they are, it seems to me, not adequate. There is, actually, a more intimate relationship within each of these pairs.

Hence, in the case of justice and love, and compassion and respect, it is not sufficient to evaluate these pairs as separate attributes of a given moral action; they are interrelated. Love needs to be normatively *shaped* by justice, making it good love, true love, just love. Compassion needs to be *shaped* by the norms of respect, keeping it fitting and true. Mercy—if it is not to be a false mercy, if it is to be a genuinely healing mercy—must be normatively *shaped* by a justice that does not miss its call and response. Without justice, mercy has no power to meet the truly wounded or to give hope to the truly broken. Only with merciful justice and just mercy will there be mutual illumination, and requisite new ways of seeing, required for at least some things to be put right.

*A Work of Mercy for the Twenty-first Century*

Among the traditional works of mercy, one stands out as a work newly relevant for the twenty-first century.<sup>8</sup> It is an odd choice, perhaps, but one that has come to the fore in the past three decades with a widespread sense of urgency and interest. It is the work of mercy named “forgiveness” (or “bearing all injuries”), seemingly newly awakened in a fractured and conflicted world. According to some, this interest is dangerous, likely to mask what is either “premature reconciliation” or despair. To others, though, it offers some inkling of the kind of conversion, de-centering, required of ourselves if we are ever to offset the worst forms of fear, resentment, and self-righteousness that divide us. It may also be the one work of mercy that can change hearts so that all other works of mercy may be newly energized to heal the brokenness around us.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> See Farley, *Compassionate Respect*, 39–43; and *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 196–206.

<sup>8</sup> I am here drawing on numerous essays and lectures of mine on forgiveness as a work of mercy. The most recent published version is in “Forgiveness in the Service of Justice and Love,” in *Changing the Questions*, 319–42.

<sup>9</sup> By focusing on this spiritual work of mercy, I do not intend to obscure the other urgent works of mercy, both corporal and spiritual, but to shed new light on these works and the spirit of mercy that informs them. The work of forgiveness does not substitute for, or counter, the other works of mercy. Indeed, there are forms of mercy that are not about forgiveness at all.

In the gospel attributed to John, we find the post-resurrection Jesus meeting with his disciples, greeting them with peace, showing them the scars from his wounds, breathing the Spirit upon them, and giving them a mission of forgiveness (John 20:19-23). According to some theologians, this is the decisive gift of the Holy Spirit. For Christians it is what makes possible a “new heart,” dying and living with Jesus Christ, partaking of God’s own mercy, restoring relationships otherwise without hope. It reaches to communities as well as individuals. It is to be offered to all who desire to drink of the waters of the Spirit. The mission is to forgive, and to reveal the forgiveness of God. As Paul says, “So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making God’s appeal through us” (2 Cor. 5:20). What can this mean for the significance of forgiveness in our world? Can *experiences of forgiveness* really bear witness to a ministry of forgiveness?

A descriptive analysis of the experience of forgiveness yields something like the following: To forgive is not to be passive in the face of injury, betrayal, or abuse. Indeed, forgiveness may be one of the most active responses possible in the face of whatever sort of breach occurs in human relationships. To forgive is a complex action, for it is a choice to act in a certain way in regard to one’s own self as well as in regard to those whom we forgive. Simply put, forgiveness is a decision to let go of something within one’s self, and to accept anew the ones by whom we have been harmed. What, however, do we let go of? Not our sense of justice, nor a sense of our own dignity as a person. Yet in forgiving another, we do let go (at least partially) of something *in* ourselves—perhaps anger, a desire to win in some conflict, resentment, perhaps building-blocks of stored-up pain. And we let go (at least partially) of something *of* ourselves—perhaps our self-protectedness, our selves desiring another chance at self-statement in the face of misjudgment by another. We choose to accept the other once again, to affectively sustain and renew our loving affirmation of the other, to be again in union with the other by whom we have been wronged and to whom we offer our forgiveness.

To understand our experiences of forgiving—whether by gaining insight into our reasons to forgive or into the elements of the experience itself—it is useful to consider also our experiences of *being forgiven*. Being forgiven, like forgiving, involves action, in this case by the recipient of forgiveness. The action is again complex, including both acceptance and letting go. The form of acceptance involved is acceptance of the word of the one forgiving, believing in the genuineness of the intention to forgive. It requires in us a letting go not only of shame and all that it might entail, but also of the objections and fears that may arise in us as one to be forgiven. Since the full efficacy of forgiveness has to do with relationship, forgiveness cannot accomplish its purpose or come full circle unless it is actively received. To accept being-forgiven, then, is to experience *new* acceptance, and to affirm being-accepted, in spite of ourselves.

Although we can learn what it means to be forgiven within human relationships, the potentially paradigmatic experience for humans is the experience of being

---

These other works of mercy also help to “put things right.” On the other hand, forgiveness is, in a sense, more radical than any of the others. One can, for example, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, even comfort the sorrowful and instruct the uneducated, without truly loving the recipient. To forgive, however, and to receive forgiveness, essentially require mercy that is *love* for those in need.

forgiven by God. To experience the forgiveness of God is to experience one's self accepted by the incomprehensible source of one's existence and life, accepted even without becoming wholly innocent, without being completely "turned around" in our ways; accepted even "while we still were sinners" (Rom. 5:8). From the almost incredible "good news" of this forgiveness, this acceptance, we learn of the love of God that exceeds our understanding and our telling, that invites us into communion with infinite goodness and beauty. The one response asked of us, and made possible within us, is the response of trust. To trust in the Word of God's forgiveness is to let go all of our objections and fears, and to believe. It is to surrender our hearts in our acceptance of being forgiven. It is, to use a phrase of Emily Dickinson, to "drop our hearts," to feel them "drop" their barriers and burdens, in freedom, accepting eternal Acceptance. It foreshadows the ultimate experience, of which we have inklings: "By my long bright—and *longer*—trust—I *drop* my Heart—*unshriven!*"<sup>10</sup>

At the center of human *forgiving*, too, is a kind of "dropping of the heart" that is the surrender, letting-go, of whatever would bind us to past injuries inflicted on us by others, or whatever would prevent our acceptance of the new life held out to us in the forgiveness of those we have injured or wronged. In both of these (that is, both being forgiven and forgiving) there is a letting go of our very selves, a kenosis that alone frees us (at least partially) to become ourselves; and there is an acceptance (as best we can), in an affective affirmation, that is, in love, of the one to be forgiven and the one forgiving. Here are the beginning choices that make renewed relationships possible. They come full circle in the mutuality that restored relationships promise.

But what if the injuries we have undergone leave our hearts incapable of the kind of love that makes forgiving possible? And what if those who injure us continue to injure us? What if there is no remorse or regret, no willingness to accept our forgiveness? What if oppressors believe their actions are justified—by whatever twisted stereotyping, judging, or stigmatizing? In our broken worlds there are, as I have tried to describe, countless situations in which injury of every sort is ongoing. How, then, is forgiveness possible, and what would be its point? In regard to *current* oppressors and false claims, must our focus be not on forgiveness, but on justice? Not on "dropping our hearts" but on a struggle against the evils that cry out to heaven for change?

The challenge in these questions is a serious one. I want to argue, however, that even in situations where injustices prevail, where the rights of individuals and groups continue to be violated, the disposition of the heart of the oppressed and violated (as well as those who stand in solidarity with them) ought to include a readiness to forgive. To argue this does not contradict a need for resistance. If we think that forgiveness all by itself is a sufficient antidote to injustice, this is a mistake. But if we think that struggles for justice are sufficient, no matter what is in our hearts, this, too, is a mistake. The challenge and the call to forgiveness in situations of ongoing humanly inflicted evil and suffering constitutes a call to forgive even those we must continue to resist. Forgiveness in such situations is what I call "anticipatory" forgiveness.

---

<sup>10</sup> Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1987), 108.

## *Plenary Session: Mercy and Its Works*

Anticipatory forgiveness shares the characteristics of any human forgiving. That is, it involves a letting go within one's self of whatever prevents a fundamental acceptance of the other, despite the fact that the other is the cause of one's injuries or loss of basic wellbeing. It is grounded in a basic respect for the other as a person, even love for the other as held in being by God. It does not mean passive acquiescence to subservience, or silence when it comes to naming the injury imposed. It does not mean failing to protect those in serious need. It does mean being ready to accept the injurer, yearning that he or she turn in sorrow to whoever has been injured; it means waiting, if necessary, until the time that the enemy may yet become the friend. It is anticipatory, therefore, not because there is as yet no disposition in us for acceptance and love, but because it cannot be fulfilled until the one who is forgiven (the perpetrator) acknowledges the injury, ceases or at least tries to cease injuring, and becomes able to recognize and accept, in turn, a forgiving embrace.

### ***Conclusion: A Way Forward***

Where, then, have we come in these considerations of broken worlds, broken societies, a wounded church? Life goes on, and things still fall apart. Are there any responses to be made to my, after all, not-so-rhetorical question in the beginning: Can a year of mercy, a year of Jubilee, really help us to put things right? For myself, I think it has a chance. It has a chance if we do not avert our eyes from the suffering around us. It has a chance if we help one another, learning together how at least some things might be put right. It has a chance if we behold not only the pain and desperation in the world but also the signs of divine mercy. It has a chance if the human works of mercy can weaken the works of war.

Mercy is not reducible to any of its works, but forgiveness, I still maintain, is particularly relevant for the twenty-first century. It is directly aimed at the healing of relationships. It can be an antidote to broken hearts, broken societies, and even broken churches precisely because it is the opposite of hatred, anger, *ressentiment*, greed, and self-righteousness. Its ways can yield dispositions and actions that are radical enough, and sufficiently embodied, to allow conditions of possibility for putting some things right, at least to a meaningful degree. In so far as it sheds light on all the other works of mercy, traditional and new, it offers paths to conversion and to hope—simply, but profoundly, in the loving of those in need.