



EXPLORATION

Mercy

Readings



1. *Works of Mercy*

by Sister Marilyn Sunderman

Feed the Hungry: In the Book of Proverbs, we read: “A generous person will be blessed for she or he shares food with the poor.” ...Globally, 3 million children die of malnutrition each year.

Give Drink to the Thirsty: Jesus said: “Whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water ... shall not lose his or her reward.” ...For many people, safe, drinkable water is not readily available. ...For almost a billion people [people must walk] ...at least four miles a day [to get water.]

Clothe the Naked: In Luke’s gospel, Jesus instructs the person who has two coats to share with another who has none. ...Millions of people cannot afford to purchase adequate clothing to protect themselves from the elements.

Visit the Sick: ...Jesus encountered many sick people. He reached out in love to those suffering from illness; he spoke encouraging words to them; sometimes, he physically touched them; and he healed them of their maladies. ...

Visit the Imprisoned: Jesus said: “I was in prison and you came to me.” ... Life in prison can be very hard.... Prisoners look forward to visits; they appreciate others’ taking time to be with them.

Shelter the Homeless: ...[For many different reasons,] “...it is estimated that 150 million people are homeless worldwide” and some “1.6 billion people

around the world live in ‘inadequate shelter.’” ...

Bury the Dead: ...Burying the dead is based on the sacredness of the human person. ...It is a way of demonstrating that the life of the deceased was valued and continues to have value....

Engage in the Works of Mercy: ... Pope Francis has said that what our world needs is the medicine of mercy....

Source: <http://www.sistersofmercy.org/blog/2017/01/23/compassion-in-action-reflections-on-matthew-25/>

2. *Being More Than Broken*

by Bryan Stevenson

I frequently had difficult conversations with clients who were struggling and despairing over their situations—over the things they’d done, or had been done to them, that had led them to painful moments. Whenever things got really bad, and they were questioning the value of their lives, I would remind them that each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done. I told them that if someone tells a lie, that person is not just a liar. If you take something that doesn’t belong to you, you are not just a thief. Even if you kill someone, you’re not just a killer.

...I am more than broken. In fact, there is a strength, a power even, in understanding brokenness, because embracing our brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy. When you experience mercy, you learn things that are hard to learn otherwise. You see things you can’t otherwise see; you hear things you can’t otherwise hear. You begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us.

...I began thinking about what would happen if we all just acknowledged our brokenness, if we owned up to our weaknesses, our deficits, our biases, our fears. Maybe if we did, we wouldn’t want to kill the broken among

us who have killed others. Maybe we would look harder for solutions to caring for the disabled, the abused, the neglected, and the traumatized. I had a notion that if we acknowledged our brokenness, we could no longer take pride in mass incarceration, in executing people, in our deliberate indifference to the most vulnerable.

Source: *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* by Bryan Stevenson (2014)

3. *Capable of Great Gifts*

by Chris Harrington

As a young family on a graduate student budget, we have become accustomed to packing our own food for travel. With this in mind, we often try to pack a little bit extra in case we should meet someone in need.

On one of these family journeys, we happened to pass a homeless man begging for spare change. As we approached him in our car, Katrina and I invited our 4-year-old son, Ryan, to help gather a bit of food to pass along to the old man. He greeted us with a warm, weathered smile, and a profound sense of gratitude. While the encounter lasted just a few moments it has remained with our eldest since.

Ryan had dozens of questions about the grizzled old man we had met on the side of the road. Who was he? Why didn’t he have food? Where did he live? Where were his friends and family?

I take it for granted that there are many who lack basic human needs, but the idea was completely foreign to our little ones who have never experienced serious want. The concept of homelessness was particularly hard for Ryan to grasp, and he returned to it constantly over the subsequent months.

...Feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty are two of the simplest opportunities to engage our youngsters. I was surprised to learn as much from watching them as they have from



me. Children have the ability to see the world with new eyes, marked by abundant compassion and gilded with a humble awe.

Source: <http://faith.nd.edu/s/1210/faith/interior.aspx?sid=1210&gid=609&pgid=30667&cid=60275&ccid=60275&crd=0&calpgid=28560&calcid=57094>

4. *Welcome to Vengeance World* by Anne Lamott

I came here with a huge open heart, like a big, sweet dog, and I still have one. But some days the only thing that can cheer me up is something bad happening to someone I hate, preferably if it went viral and the photo of the person showed hair loss and perhaps the lifelong underuse of sunscreen. My heart still leaps to see this. I often recall the New Yorker cartoon of one dog saying to the other: “It’s not enough that we succeed. Cats must also fail.” This is the human condition, that in the face of death, cats must lose.

An open, merciful heart is a setup for pain, shame, and being mocked. We are not stupid: welcome to Vengeance World. The original wound was our parents’ belief in punishment: spanking, shame, exile, the silent treatment, isolation. It was pretty convincing.

I’m not sure I even recognize the ever-presence of mercy anymore, the divine and the human; the messy, crippled, transforming, heartbreaking, lovely, devastating presence of mercy. But I have come to believe that I am starving to death for it, and my world is, too.

Source: *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy* by Anne Lamott (2017)

5. *Opening the Door of Mercy* by Karin Round

One afternoon a couple of summers ago, just as the sky was darkening, a woman I didn’t know stood sagging on our threshold, holding the screen door open. I saw the silhouette of her head through the window.

No, she answered me, she was not

all right. She didn’t feel well at all. So, I wondered, what was I supposed to do now?

This moment of decision had happened to me before. For almost nineteen years, we’ve lived here at the foot of a highway exit ramp. Our address is blandly suburban, but the highway often leads exhausted cars onto our curb. Lately cell phones have diminished the flow, but we’ve met many people in distress. More diverse than our own community, these travelers have all asked for little things, such as the phone, a glass of water, or simply directions. All have been strangers to me.

Ours is a cynical, suspicious time. Conventional wisdom advises that to act as a good Samaritan is to be naive and risk terrible consequences.

...I believe repeatedly rejecting others who need help endangers me, too. I’d rather risk my physical safety than my peace of mind. I’d rather live my life acting out of mercy than save it by living in fear and hostility.

So here where we live on that afternoon one summer when the woman was sinking like the sun on my front porch, I made my choice.

I opened the door.

Source: <https://thisibelieve.org/essay/14284/>

6. *What is Mercy?* by Anne Lamott

Maybe it would be helpful to ask what we mean when we speak or dream of mercy.

...Mercy is radical kindness. Mercy means offering or being offered aid in desperate straits. Mercy is not deserved. It involves absolving the unabsolvable, forgiving the unforgivable. Mercy brings us to the miracle of apology, given and accepted, to unashamed humility when we have erred or forgotten. Charge it to our heads and not our hearts, as the elders in black churches have long said. Mercy, grace, forgiveness, and compassion are synonyms, and the approaches we might consider taking when facing a great big mess, especially the great big mess of ourselves—our arrogance, greed, poverty, disease, prejudice. It includes everything out there that just makes us sick and makes us want to turn away, the idea of accepting life as it

presents itself and doing goodness anyway, the belief that love and caring are marbled even into the worst life has to offer.

... Mercy means that we soften ever so slightly, so that we don’t have to condemn others for being total shits, although they may be that. (Okay: are.) If I do so, it makes me one. As Father Ed Dowling said, sometimes heaven is just a new pair of glasses. When we put them on, we see the awful person, sometimes even ourselves, a bit more gently, and we are blessed in return. It seems, on the face of things, like a decent deal.

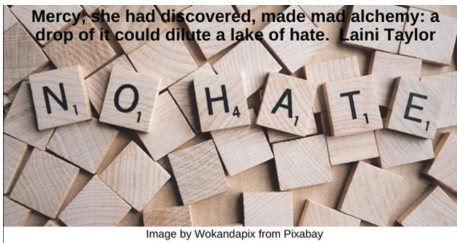
Source: *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy* by Anne Lamott (2017)

7. *Mercy Overflowing* by Nicky Gumbel

When Nelson Mandela left prison after twenty-seven years and became South Africa’s first democratically elected president, he called upon his old friend, Desmond Tutu, to chair The Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This commission was a series of hearings—some of them public—in which both victims and perpetrators gave testimony about their experiences and actions during apartheid.

At one of the hearings, a policeman called van de Broek told of how he and his fellow officers shot an eighteen-year-old youth, then burnt the body. Eight years later they went back, took the father and forced his wife to watch as he was incinerated. She was in court to hear this confession and was asked by the judge what she wanted. She said she wanted van de Broek to go to the place where they had buried her husband’s body and gather up the dust so that she could give him a decent burial. Van de Broek agreed.

She then added a further request. “Mr. van de Broek took all my family away from me, and I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month I would like for him to come to the ghetto and spend a day with me so that I can be a mother to him. And I would like Mr. van de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him too. I would like to embrace him so he can know that my forgiveness is real.” Spontaneously, some in the courtroom began



singing *Amazing Grace* as the elderly woman made her way to the witness stand. But van de Broek did not hear the hymn, he had fainted, overwhelmed.

Source: <https://bibleinoneyear.org/bioy/commentary/94>

Wisdom Story

Mercy Unexpected

by Adam Makos & Larry Alexander

The pilot glanced outside his cockpit and froze. He blinked hard and looked again, hoping it was just a mirage. But his co-pilot stared at the same horrible vision.

“My God, this is a nightmare,” the co-pilot said.

“He’s going to destroy us,” the pilot agreed.

The men were looking at a gray German Messerschmitt fighter hovering just three feet off their wingtip. It was five days before Christmas 1943, and the fighter had closed in on their crippled American B-17 bomber for the kill.

The B-17 pilot, Charles Brown, was a 21-year-old West Virginia farm boy on his first combat mission. His bomber had been shot to pieces by swarming fighters, and his plane was alone in the skies above Germany. Half his crew was wounded, and the tail gunner was dead, his blood frozen in icicles over the machine guns.

But when Brown and his co-pilot, Spencer “Pinky” Luke, looked at the fighter pilot again, something odd happened. The German didn’t pull the trigger. He nodded at Brown instead. What happened next was one of the most remarkable acts of chivalry recorded during World War II. Years later, Brown would track down his would-be executioner for a reunion that reduced both men to tears.

Source: *A Higher Call: An Incredible True Story of Combat and Chivalry in the War-Torn Skies of World War II* by Adam Makos and Larry Alexander

Snippets

“For some reason, the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes (Matthew 5). But, often with tears in their eyes, they demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. And of course, that’s Moses, not Jesus. I haven’t heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere. ‘Blessed are the merciful’ in a courtroom? ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’ in the Pentagon? Give me a break!”
Kurt Vonnegut

“Sometimes on your travel through hell, you meet people that think they are in heaven because of their cleverness and ability to get away with things. Travel past them because they don’t understand who they have become and never will. These types of people feel justified in revenge and will never learn mercy or forgiveness because they live by comparison. They are the people that don’t care about anyone.... They [would] rather put out your light than find their own. They don’t have the ability to see beyond the false sense of happiness they get from destroying others. You know what happiness is and it isn’t this.”
Shannon L. Alder

“Religion carries two sorts of people in two entirely opposite directions: the mild and gentle people it carries towards mercy and justice; the persecuting people it carries into fiendish sadistic cruelty. Mind you, though this may seem to justify the eighteenth-century Age of Reason in its contention that religion is nothing but an organized, gigantic fraud and a curse to the human race, nothing could be farther from the truth. It possesses these two aspects, the evil one of the two appealing to people capable of naïve hatred; but what is actually happening is that when you get natures stirred to their depths over questions which they feel to be overwhelmingly vital, you get the bad stirred up in them as well as the good; the mud as well as the water. It doesn’t seem to matter much which sect you have, for both types occur in all sects....”
Alfred North Whitehead

Mercy

“She asks me to kill the spider. Instead, I get the most peaceful weapons I can find.

I take a cup and a napkin. I catch the spider, put it outside and allow it to walk away.

If I am ever caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, just being alive and not bothering anyone,

I hope I am greeted with the same kind of mercy.” *Rudy Francisco*

“The fragility of our era is this, too: we don’t believe that there is a chance for redemption; for a hand to raise you up; for an embrace to save you, forgive you, pick you up, flood you with infinite, patient, indulgent love; to put you back on your feet. We need mercy.”

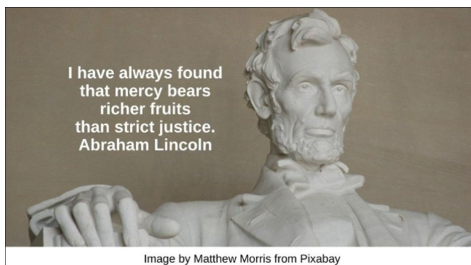
Pope Francis

“We know our inaction and inertia will be the inheritance of the next Generation / Our blunders become their burdens / But one thing is certain: If we merge mercy with might, / and might with right, / then love becomes our legacy / and change our children’s birthright / So let us leave behind a country / better than the one we were left with.” *Amanda Gorman*

“To believe that the experiences we have are valid, that the feelings and expressions of them are true and real and worthy of being listened to, is one of the greatest mercies we offer each other.” *Alia Joy*

“If justice is what love sounds like when it speaks in public, then patience is what mercy sounds like out loud, and forgiveness is the accent with which grace speaks.” *Michael Eric Dyson*

“One isn’t necessarily born with courage, but one is born with potential. Without courage, we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We cannot be kind, true, merciful, generous, or honest.” *Maya Angelou*



"The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned."

Bryan Stevenson

Questions

1. In reading #1, Sister Marilyn Sunderman discusses the seven works of mercy: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick, visit the imprisoned, shelter the homeless, and bury the dead. The first six were commented upon by Jesus in Matthew 25. Many of these are components of community service or social justice efforts. Which of these have you been involved with? Why? Which are most neglected in society today? Can doing works of mercy increase mercy? How? What works of mercy would add to the traditional list? Why?
2. Bryan Stevens, in reading #2 writes that "embracing our brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy." Do you agree? Why or why not? When have you needed mercy? Was it given or withheld? How did it impact you? Have you shown mercy? What prompted you to do so? What impact did showing mercy have on you? On the other person?
3. In reading #3, Chris Harrington shares how he and his wife tried to teach mercy to their son. How is mercy extended to children? How is it withheld? What are the results in each instance? How can we teach children to be merciful? What happens to them and the world if they do not learn this?
4. In reading #4, Anne Lamott writes, citing a common attitude, that, "An open, merciful heart is a setup for pain, shame, and being mocked." Do you agree? The nature of the zero-sum game in the conflict of mercy versus vengeance is summed up as follows: "It's not enough that we succeed. Cats must also fail." Does this sum up, at least in part, the attitude of some? Why or why not? How can we stop "uncivil wars" and all that contributes to them? Lamott concludes, in terms of mercy, "I have come to believe that I am starving to death for it, and my world is, too." Is your world starving for mercy? Why or why not?
5. In reading #5, Karin Round writes, "...I believe repeatedly rejecting others who need help endangers me, too. I'd rather risk my physical safety than my peace of mind. I'd rather live my life acting out of mercy than save it by living in fear and hostility." Are you concerned, as is she, that "repeatedly rejecting others who need help endangers" you? Why or why not? What hardens the heart? What softens the heart? How is it with your heart?
6. In reading #6, Anne Lamott defines mercy as "radical kindness," which is not every-day, ordinary kindness because mercy is not deserved. Perhaps we become more merciful by looking at things in new ways. Lamott quotes Father Ed Dowling who said, "Sometimes heaven is just a new pair of glasses." Who do you know who needs a new pair of glasses? What about politicians, judges, etc. How is your vision? Have you missed looking with mercy from time to time? What clouds our vision?
7. In reading number #7, Nicky Gumbel writes about an elderly South African woman who attended a hearing at the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission for a hearing of a policeman named van de Broek, who had killed the woman's son and, 8 years later, her husband, shooting and burning both of them. Hearing his confession, the woman was asked what she wanted done. She asked that van de Broek go to the site of her husband's murder and gather up the dust so that she could give her husband a proper burial. She also asked that van de Broek visit her twice a month to experience her love and forgiveness. This was radical mercy. Upon hearing her words van de Broek became overwhelmed and fainted. How many other people could do what she did? Could you? In such a broken word, perhaps this kind of mercy is needed more than we know. How can we become more merciful individually? Collectively? Can we survive if we don't?

The following questions are related to the Snippets.

8. Kurt Vonnegut points to the hypocrisy in public protestations of mercy. He contrasts the vengeance of the Old Testament with the compassion and mercy of the New Testament. What would it mean if "blessed are the merciful" was posted in courtrooms? Could this attitude advance Bryan Stevenson's commitment to "just mercy?" Why or why not?
9. Shannon Alder writes about people whose narcissism blinds them to reality and truth. Sartre said that, "Hell is other people." He meant that how others perceive us can be a kind of hell. Alder advises that we refuse to be defined by their version of reality because it is warped. In this sense, how do we exercise mercy for ourselves first, before considering mercy for those who would destroy us? Mercy is limited. Like other transactions, mercy must be reciprocated by acknowledgement, or gratitude, or a change of heart, otherwise the pursuit of mutual happiness is not possible. Why do some people fail to respond to mercy, especially when it is hard to extend to them? What options, if any, are we left with when they do not respond to them? In this regard, does mercy merit a response by the person receiving mercy? Why or why not?
10. Alfred North Whitehead distinguishes between people disposed to mercy and justice and those dis-

posed to “fiendish sadistic cruelty.” He states that religion produces both kinds of people. The corollary is that people who are not religious also migrate in these entirely opposite directions. What predisposes a person to choose mercy? to choose cruelty? How might the scale be tipped to favor more mercy? John Stuart Mill wrote words that were later adapted as follows: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” What are some of the things in our troubled world that good people need to do combat evil? What role could mercy play?

11. In his poem, *Mercy*, Rudy Francisco writes about saving a spider. Does mercy in small things promote mercy in more things? Does mercy beget mercy? Why or why not? How wide is your mercy, narrow like the Priest and Levite, or wide like that of the Good Samaritan? How can we encourage people to widen their mercy?
12. Pope Francis writes that we all need mercy. Have you needed mercy? Was it forthcoming? If yes, what did it mean to you? How can we help put people back on their feet as he advocates? Is there reluctance in society to actually do this? Why or why not?
13. Amanda Gorman writes about how we can either harm the next generation or leave a legacy of love. What are we bequeathing to future generations? Of that, what will help? What will harm? How might mercy become a part of our legacy? How could mercy leave behind a country better than the one we were given?
14. We tend to think that mercy involves forgiveness and the way that justice is applied, but Alia Joy suggests that it is even more fundamental. She writes that small mercies include just being listened to by someone. What small mercies have you benefited from? What small mercies have you extended to others? How could the world be transformed by small mercies?
15. Michael Eric Dyson writes about love, patience, mercy, forgiveness,

and grace. How do these five virtues intersect? What is the language of mercy? The work of mercy? Do you agree with Dyson that mercy requires patience? Why or why not?

16. Do you agree with Maya Angelou’s assertions that we have the potential for courage, and that without courage no other virtues are really possible? Why does there seem to be such a shortage of courage today? Encourage means “to put heart into.” How can we encourage youth to choose the virtues that Angelou lists: courage, kindness, truthfulness, mercifulness, generosity, and honesty? If World War II happened today, would the Allies have the courage to win? Why or why not? Note that the Allies treated their adversaries with mercy as opposed to what happened in the aftermath of World War I. Per Angelou, how does extending mercy require courage?

17. Bryan Stevenson is concerned about the true measure of our character, which he defines as how we treat “the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.” Jesus spoke of such people as being “the least of these.” To what extent is our character formed (or deformed) by racism, white supremacy, and other false, yet arrogant claims of superiority? How does this deformed character corrupt one’s disposition towards “just mercy?”

