



Survivors and Mercy
Retreat for Survivors, Family Members, Support Persons
Diocese of Arlington, Virginia

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(only partial transcript exists)

Song

“Mercy” by Phil Wickham

MERCY & FALSE GUILT

Teresa – Guided Imagery

Imagine our sense of shame, guilt, failure as a covering, a jacket, a sweater, a coat, a shawl. What is it like? Heavy? Color? Texture? Material? Feel it. Feel the weight of this burden of unworthiness ... from abuse ... Take a moment to imagine where you might be willing to shed it if only for this morning ... hang it, fold it, throw it. Keep it in eyesight, or not. You’ll be able to pick it back up before you leave, for now unguarded in each other’s company ... open ... Now, let’s listen to Fr Lou...

Fr. Lou

I am grateful to be invited, once again, to share with you a morning of reflection in the presence of the Lord. Together let us ask for the graces you needed for this time together to enrich the journey of healing on which each of you is traveling.

I am grateful, too, to be present here as you share your wisdom and mercy with each other. These are mercies and hard-won insights that you each can offer as no other can. Truly, you are Christ to one another's healing. You are to each other what Pope Francis called "heralds of mercy" after having endured, yourselves, abuse and trauma where there was no mercy and only aloneness.

Today, we gather together in fellowship. Here, you are not alone. You have each other's stories of survival and resilience. Here we share true mercy and kindness. Here, how uniquely gifted your suffering has left you may become clearer. Here you may be uplifted to see that you have mercy to offer others, to live Jesus, to live His mercy in others' lives.

Soon Advent will begin. Our new liturgical year will arrive. It is a year which Pope Francis has called a Year of Mercy. Today, let us consider "mercy" in light of each survivor's past abuse, present survival and future thriving in the grace of God.

I have one concern about raising the idea of mercy here. Survivors live part of their lives – sometimes all their lives – feeling guilty. Shame can be a central struggle in your recovery from abuse. Even those of you who have made astounding progress can, at the mere mention of "mercy," feel a sense of guilt afresh. These are sensitive topics. So, should I avoid the idea of mercy here? I did wonder. But with prayer I decided we might proceed carefully, gently, caringly. It seems worth the effort, because I, who have been blessed to come to know most of you, have come to understand how

you really are, as Pope Francis says, “heralds of mercy” in a broken and unjust world.

It has been my experienced that survivors have a special understanding of – and gift for – mercy. So, my reflections today encourage you to draw on your own survival and resilience as a spiritual wealth from which to offer first yourselves, then each other, and then others mercy. But first let us consider that spiritual wealth – at its Source.

For survivors, it seems to me, that the call to offer mercy is the call first to confront the shame that often can burden you. This is a shame that you begin to unravel early in your recovery. It is a shame that, for some of you, recurs when events trigger your memories – or when you are tired or discouraged by everyday life. It is a shame that drives you to “do” before you just “be.” It is a shame that says you are not worthy, so you mistakenly try to earn God’s love when you simply need to accept it.

For me who has been blessed to know you, this drive to deserve mercy stands in stark contrast to how generously merciful and caring you are to others and to each other. If you could only be so kind to yourselves.

You already have access to the love and mercy you need to become free of the false guilt and shame that may keep you from freely living the life God has given to you. By seeking deeper communion with the Lord, you are opening yourself to His graces. Being together here in fellowship, you are already a light to others. You have survived.

And, yes, you may feel broken. You may be broken. There are steps it is important to take to seek care and healing. But you do not need to wait to somehow earn the right to shine a light on another’s path. Even your shortcomings are part of how the Lord shines through you. Your brokenness is a way for the Lord’s light to touch others through you. Here the question is not whether you are worthy, but rather it is what are the impediments to your ability to shine ever more freely? Often, that

impediment for survivors and their loved ones is a sense of shame or of guilt – of unworthiness.

Intellectually, you may be able to agree with what I see and know. There is no rational basis for any such shame or unworthiness. What happened to you was not of your own doing. You did not cause the abuse. You did not deserve abuse. You are innocent of that terrible sin perpetrated upon you. What we understand together is that part of recovery from abuse is getting your heart to agree with your mind....

God's grace can inspire and sustain the encounter between heart and mind. There are others whom you grow to trust who can help you believe. One of many gifts of this fellowship of survivors is how you each see in each other no reason for guilt or shame – no unworthiness. Perhaps you are the most credible witnesses to each other's freedom from shame and guilt.

In this, you help each other find within one's own preciousness in the sight of God. As you are. Dearly loved by our Lord. No matter how broken or failed you may judge yourself to be – this is not how our Lord sees you or loves you. If you wish to understand how our Lord sees you, you might better try seeing yourself in the eyes of your fellow survivors here – see their respect for you, their kindness and regard, their mercy toward your shortcomings.

Today, here, together, you have dared to set your burden aside. You have tucked heavy coats and coverings somewhere in your imaginations, so now you are more free to consider you as God sees you, the beauty of you, even as some of that unique beauty may have been forged in pain.

Let's remember, here, in this safe place, gathered together in the name of Jesus, how what you suffered – and what has wounded you – has also made you strong, and wise, and kind. You, who have endured times in your life where mercy and justice were lacking, may now be uniquely sensitive to another's need for mercy – and uniquely able to offer it sensitively, wisely,

with kindness... with the gentleness which St. Francis de Sales considered a holy way of life.

Remember: It is not uncommon for you, as survivors of abuse and loved ones, to doubt your worth. It is not uncommon to hide because of the shame that lingers. It is not uncommon for those who love survivors to share this sense of low self-image and shame – a sense of failure or guilt for the abuse ever having happened at all, or a sense of failure or guilt for not being able just “to get over it” and “move on.”

As you heal from the trauma in your life, you will come to understand how false this sense of guilt is. You will see what we know, that the abuse is not your failure at all. You will, I hope and pray, increasingly internalize what you hear in the safe circle of this survivor fellowship: It was not your fault. You did not cause this to happen.

The more you are able to perceive how false guilt and shame hold you back, the more your healing will progress – but also, for the purposes of our reflection today, the more you will see all that you have to offer the world from the wonderful person you are right now, wounded as you may feel, broken as you may be, grieving as you must. Try to offer yourself mercy. Look at the mercy you so readily offer one another and borrow some to shower on your own wounded self. With each other you may find it easier to be released from false guilt and shame, self-doubt and fear. The more you offer mercy to yourself, the more you will be able to venture forward and share from the bounty of healing graces God holds out to you.

Now, as a ministry to one another, let’s take time to speak with each other about mercies we may need from ourselves and mercies we may wish on others.

MERCY, DISTRACTIONS AND CLUTTER

Teresa – Guided Imagery

Let's just check in with our coats of burden. Are they still there? Look at them closely. Remember their texture? Remember their material? Remember their color? Remember how they felt when you you're your coat of burden. Remember hanging it, or folding it, or throwing it. What does the room look like where you left it? Is it a safe room? Is it safer? Stop. Listen. Listen to the quiet. Is God there?

Fr. Lou

By setting aside your sense of burden, your false sense of guilt, you have offered yourself mercy of a type and in a way that no one else can. Doing so, you have also relied on the grace of God, for such a gift to self is a divine thing we cannot accomplish on our own.

His grace has helped you see this burden and its falsehoods – and to step away from them if only for a short time. His grace has helped you be here, in this morning of fellowship and prayer. You have not been alone. You are not alone now. You will not be alone when you leave. God is with you, seeking you at every instant you feel lost in pain. He holds nothing back in His desire to keep you from being lost in this broken world with its injustice and evildoing. God has given His all to reach into your own pain following abuse and trauma. God has gone so far as to give you – just you, specifically you – His Son, as Savior, as Brother, as Friend, as Companion. You are not walking this path of healing alone. You are free to walk with Jesus.

The gift of Jesus can be hard to comprehend. Indeed, our finite minds are naturally overwhelmed by His Infinite Divinity. Even the most spiritually mature person is overwhelmed when encountering God. Part of being a Catholic is becoming, through prayer and sacraments and sacrifice, ever more able to receive the unparalleled gift of God's Son being born in our lives. This is a lifelong quest. Like the Christmas nativity whose feast is fast upon us, we all have dark places in our lives where we need God's Son to be born.

Simply because of our frail humanity, it is these very dark spaces where we most need Jesus to become Incarnate that we create distractions and clutter – crowding Jesus out as a way, perhaps, to protect ourselves from the impact of encountering His mercy. It can be so much easier to live inside our own self-judgments.

God can feel scary. As our shame resists it, God’s mercy can feel “too easy” or not believable. As our despair resists it, God’s graces for hope can seem unrealistic or even fantastical. As our fear resists them, God’s promises can seem like they are meant for somebody else, someone who has suffered less and who has less to guard against. God’s generosity can have the force of a tsunami, and we can recoil from feeling overwhelmed, out of control.

God can also feel scary because, as we contemplate His perfection we will feel our imperfection more acutely. As we contemplate His strength, we will feel by contrast our weakness more acutely. As we contemplate His beauty, we may feel ourselves as falling so short as to be unworthy. If we encounter God without God’s grace, we can get lost in our own self-judgment, our own lack of mercy.

Yet, there is a reason we want to set aside the clutter and noise we use to protect ourselves against transforming grace. Because God in His mercy is already rushing to let us share His perfection. Because He is already making up for our weakness with His might. Because He is already the source of our own beauty.

Relying on His grace, we can set aside our self-recrimination. We can leave ourselves open to God’s transforming grace. We can let God lead us into His perfection. We can let God’s might make us strong. We can counter the inclination toward shame and guilt with God’s beauty, which is our beauty. Doing so, we can take just one further small step in letting go of your coat of burden – letting go of false guilt and shame and hopelessness.

MERCY & UNBELIEF

Teresa – Guided Imagery

Take a look at your coat now. Remember. Different? Imagine God touching this coat. You are far enough away to see it happen. Is there light? Is there any sign at all He has touched it? Is it changed? Even at this distance, do you feel differently yourself? Do you feel differently about the idea of putting it back on? Do you BELIEVE in the possibility of healing?

Fr. Lou

So far we have considered how false guilt can be an impediment to mercy in our own lives – mercy from God, from others, and from ourselves. We have noted how this false guilt and shame from abuse can make it difficult to cultivate an openness to God’s mercy and grace.

Now, in this final reflection, let me focus on something that has been raised on the margins earlier. That is, despite the wounds they bear, survivors often have a capacity for offering mercy unlike others who have not survived similar trauma. Indeed, Pope Francis may have been prophetic in referring to survivors of abuse as “heralds of mercy.” Ultimately, whether this is true for you or not is for you to discern in prayer with God’s help. But, for now, the question is really whether you believe in healing.

Believing in healing is not a human act. It is a divine gift, for one thing. For centuries Christians have marveled at the sure faith of <missing> who replied to Jesus, “I do believe. Heal my unbelief.” We recognize in <missing reference> our own mix of strength and weakness, certainty and doubt. Often we believe and don’t believe at the same time. So it’s no surprise that as a survivor heals from the aftermath of abuse, they may feel like they are healing, and at the same time feel no healing at all. At times you may trust God to handle the mess and not really trust Him completely. All of us both can be filled with belief and ask for healing for our lack of belief. God understands. After all, God fashioned us exactly as we are.

God Himself understands our conflicted human nature. Even this He infused with divinity when, on the cross as He was dying, Jesus cried out to God in despair: “My God, My God, why have You abandoned me?” But He also begged for his Father’s mercy, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” We are not alone in the contradictions of our daily lives – or the difficult contradictions with which you grapple as you recover from the trauma of abuse.

Healing from abuse can be full of contradictions. You talk about being angry for very good reasons, and you talk about needing to let go of anger to reduce stress and tension. You have a natural distrust of unknown people, yet struggle to find ways to bridge the gap between isolation and an uncertain world. You feel weak sometimes when you are acting your strongest. At the same time you feel guilt, you are also seeking to accept your very real innocence as a child or teen who was abused. These are some of the feelings of contradictions you have shared with me.

Precisely because of these contradictions, perhaps, you may have become meek of heart. That is not “weak” of heart, but “meek,” the difference is very great. As the sacred heart of Jesus broke on the contradiction of the Cross, so your hearts reflect His divinity – or can, if you wish to continue to deepen your connection with Him through prayer, sacraments and sacrifice. Then, the wounds you bear – as He has borne wounds from acts of evil – can serve others with love and mercy.

We are moving into the Christmas season. It, too, is full of contradictions. The Eternal King is born into time, without finery, without home, in a stable not a royal palace. In the darkness of a Bethlehem night, the Light of the World broke through. God became man, soul and divinity. These contradictions point to holiness, like the contradiction of the Cross points to holiness as well.

It is not unusual for survivors to struggle with the many contradictions of recovery. I have mentioned a few a moment ago. Yet, often you are dispirited by them, as if there is something wrong with contradictions. When you do, try to remember that God reveals Himself in contradictions. Contradiction is not always a bad thing, even on our spiritual paths.

Christmas also fraught for many with contradictions that arise with a holiday where family and gatherings are central – even idealized. For survivors, the pain of such contradictions can be acute. For example, as you know, families are often wounded, or broken, or remain dysfunctional and unsafe. Christmas can be lonely among many, or solitary in a noisy world.

As recovery progresses, you learn to rebuild your world with healthful people. You create what we call “a patchwork quilt of support” a little bit at a time. Advent is a good time to find pieces for your quilt of love. Doing so is a way of offering yourself mercy, but also encountering others who will be able to appreciate how the beauty and mercy and majesty of God shines through you – light into the darkness of a sometimes very cluttered and distracted season. As recovery draws you closer to God, you have more to shine into an unrecovered world. You, indeed, in every encounter can be a “herald of mercy.”

Advent also can lose its spiritual power as people focus only on Christmas. Yet, the prayerfulness of Advent opens the spaces inside ourselves to discover God’s beauty and mercy born – even where our belief is weakest and we harbor strong doubts. So, now, let’s take a moment to pray for each other and the coming Advent season of prayer, with the Jubilee Year of Mercy at the start.

On your tables you have paper to make a list of spiritual gifts you wish to offer for all the members of this survivor fellowship – those here, those in Arlington who could not attend today, and all those survivors who need our prayers and unique insights. After 15 minutes, we’ll stop and go around the room, with each table sharing its list aloud.

Teresa

Your intentions and comments written during our group discussions will be put in this basket and brought to the altar for our closing prayer service. Also, I'm here for further consultation and discussion

PAUSE

It's time now just to take a moment and breathe. Can you receive all you have heard and felt this morning? Take a look at your coat. Does it look different? Has where it is hanging changed? Has the effect of God's touch sunk into its fiber at all? As we close the morning's reflections, take a moment before you resume your coat and ask yourself – do I need to? Is it possible to leave it here a little while longer?

Fr. Lou

As a closing reflection, it's important to remind you that the call to mercy is not a call to action. It is important it is that you do not push yourself to give of yourself until your healing has progressed. Healing takes time. Patience with yourself is very important. Patience is an important act of mercy towards yourself.

In closing, let us join in prayer: Heavenly Father, please grant Your healing grace and mercy on attendees here and survivors and loved ones in Arlington and elsewhere who need Your Light in their darkness, Your reassurance in their contradictions, Your Son's Incarnation in their unbelief. We ask this through Christ our Lord

HANDOUTS

POPE FRANCIS speech to the survivors in Philadelphia; POPE FRANCIS declaration of Jubilee Year of Mercy; Print out of what spiritual and corporeal acts of mercy are; Print out of articles by Arlington survivors in the annual report