GOD’S MERCY

A well-known bishop was having his portrait painted by one of the teachers in the art department at a near-by university. This bishop was unusually plain looking; in fact, some might call him homely. (By the way, this is not any bishop we know.) A fellow bishop remarked half-jokingly: “I hope the artist does you justice.” To which the bishop replied: “I don’t want justice; I want mercy.”

We all truly desire mercy. Today is Divine Mercy Sunday. And we are blessed to be celebrating the Year of Mercy. Pope Francis has recently proclaimed that the “Name of God is Mercy.” Jesus made God visible by becoming man and showing us that the Father is always ready to shower us with mercy.

All too often, however, we are not so eager to show mercy to others in our turn. Take road rage, for example, which most of us have probably engaged in to some extent and which is definitely not in the spirit of mercy.

Of course, it is true that we all could find excuses for holding a grudge because we have all been hurt by our parents, kids, spouses, siblings, friends, neighbors, coworkers, bosses, and on and on.

And we are tempted to strike back at times.

But Gandhi once said that if you practice an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, you’re going to wind up with a universe of toothless and blind people.

And Jesus taught us to forgive and, in today’s gospel, he assures us that we can find forgiveness. Often, we have focused on the doubting Thomas in this gospel, but Divine Mercy Sunday invites us to focus on the forgiveness and compassion which Jesus gives us to celebrate in his name when he
proclaims to his apostles in today’s reading from John: “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them … “

Of course, forgiveness is a two-way street “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive …,” the Lord’s Prayer says.

Some unbelievably heroic examples of forgiveness and mercy are out there. Some of the most profound come from the era of the Holocaust in World War II. Here is perhaps the most incredible of all:

An unknown woman in the Ravensbruck concentration camp in northern Germany during that war wrote this little prayer and pinned it to the dead body of a little girl there. The prayer goes like this: “Oh, Lord” she wrote, “remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the sufferings they have inflicted on us. Remember rather the fruits we have bought, thanks to this suffering: [the fruits of] our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity; and the greatness of heart that has grown out of all of this. And when they come to judgment, let all the fruits we have borne be their forgiveness.”

That is Divine Mercy! Divine Mercy it is! That note reminds us of what Jesus said from the cross: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

We can take to heart this beautiful example of mercy from a concentration camp of not too long ago.

If we were honest, wouldn’t we have to admit that most of our grievances are petty compared to those of the woman at Ravensbruck? of course, some hurts are not petty and forgiveness is not too easy sometimes. And legal fairness must be honored and criminals have to be brought to justice. But, can we not forgive most of the time and more than most of the time?

We might feel that certain people deserve no mercy. We may even feel sometimes that we do not deserve mercy. But this is not the way God feels: In Feodor Dostoevsky’s (1821-1881) famous Russian novel, Crime and Punishment, a murderer recognizes his guilt, his unworthiness, but offers
them as the very reason for being open to mercy. He cries out in a famous passage from the book:

“You’re right. I don’t deserve any pity. I ought to be crucified. Crucified and not pitied. But he who takes pity on all men will also take pity on me. And he who understands all men and all things, he alone is judge. And he will judge all and will forgive them: the good and the bad, the wise and the meek. And when he is done with all of them, he will say unto us, ‘Come forth, you also. Come forth, ye who are drunk. Come forth, ye who know no shame.’ And we shall all come forth without being ashamed, and we will stand before him. And the wise will say, and the learned will say, ‘Lord, why dost thou receive them?’ And he will say unto them, ‘I receive them, oh wise men, I receive them, oh learned men, [precisely] because not one of them ever thought himself worthy of it.’ And he will stretch out his arms to us, and we shall fall down before him, and we shall weep, and we shall understand all.”

My experience in ministry has convinced me that many people do not think themselves worthy of forgiveness and this may explain why they also cannot forgive others. If we can see that God looks upon us as being worthy of mercy, then maybe we can forgive ourselves and our neighbor too.

The Catholic writer and speaker, Matthew Kelly, spoke here at St. Paul’s in the old church a few years ago. He expressed his sadness that he had never been in a church where they said a prayer for Saddam Hussein – who at that time was still alive. Today we have the so-called Islamic State which commits unspeakable barbarism. But the really hard part is that these people really think they are doing the right thing in the name of God – as no doubt Saddam Hussein thought too. Like most people, I look forward to the defeat of the Islamic State. And certainly their crimes must be opposed. But in the spirit of the woman at Ravensbruck and especially in the spirit of Christ who forgave his torturers on Calvary, is it not good that we pray for extremists that they may have a change of heart and find God’s mercy some day?
Last night (Saturday April 2) at a prayer Vigil for Divine Mercy Sunday, Pope Francis said: “A faith that is incapable of being merciful isn’t faith, it’s an idea, an ideology” – that is, it’s something to be argued about instead of lived; something supported by apologetics instead of supported by deeds of mercy.

On this Divine Mercy Sunday, may we open our hearts to the Divine Mercy which Jesus proclaims in today’s gospel and may we have the courage to extend that mercy to others, even to those who seem to us to be the most unworthy! This is very hard, yes. But it is also undeniably God-like. And we, who are made in God’s image and likeness, are called to show his merciful face to everyone. And the more unworthy of mercy they seem to us, the more God-like we will be in having mercy on them. And the more God-like we are, the more human we are – because, remember, God made us in his image, and therefore it is our destiny to live the divine life of God for ever in the world to come!