

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2023 A

If you were at Mass before the Sarah Hart concert recently, I apologize for some repetition. The Mass that evening was in honor of the Mercy of God, and I recalled the Year of Mercy the Church observed 8 years ago. As something concrete to keep it in everyone's mind, I chose buttons like this. Can you read it from there? ... I can't even read it from here! But it says: ***Merciful Like the Father; Year of Mercy 2015-16.*** Small indeed. Being cheap, I chose a simple design for it online and the website said: "***This is how your button will appear.***" Looked fine to me, I hit OK ... and a few weeks later, I got a nice box of these. What the site didn't say is: this is the SIZE your button will appear. I consoled myself by telling folks ... it will make people lean in and ask what that says, and then you have an opportunity for evangelization. ***But the greater lesson is perhaps that mercy does not always look like one expects.***

"Ask something of Me and I will give it to you." There is something about God's offer to Solomon that sounds a bit like familiar fables – being granted three wishes or Aladdin's lamp. But behind such fables and the experience of Solomon's dream is the deeper reality of God's constant presence and work in the world. Later, Jesus will say: "Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you." ***But what God sends is not always what we imagine; what we find is not always what we were looking for; where God leads is not always where we would have chosen to go. The treasure is buried, the pearl of great price can be elusive.***

God's gifts are sometimes familiar. I think of the kind gentleman who pulled over to help many years ago when my Dodge stalled on Highway 10 on a cold January night and gave me a ride to my parents' home a few miles away. Or the friend who drove me to the hospital years back for my latest kidney stone. **But** there is also the time not long ago at the hospital when I anointed a woman undergoing an emergency surgery, seeing the doctors and nurses step away with respect for the few seconds I took in that urgent moment to call on God's help for her and for all of them. In that chaotic scene, there was divine mercy.

Or the young man coming to the rectory in St. Cloud on a rainy Sunday morning between Masses carrying a small child in pajamas. I thought it would be an appeal for money with this little boy as a lever to tug at the heartstrings; but it turned out he had been driving and saw this small child wandering on the sidewalk in the rain and pulled over to help, and so he brought him to the only place he knew would be open that time of day. That was a lesson in mercy for me in more ways than one. Or the older gentleman who came into the confessional about 20 years ago and when I began, “In the name of the Father ...” he said: “I didn’t come to go to confession. I just want to tell you that I hate you, Father.” Then, for about 45 minutes he told me every painful thing that had happened to him in his experience with the Church, things he had never before voiced. After a few minutes I felt myself wanting to reply to some of his comments; but the Holy Spirit clearly spoke in that moment: “Just listen. Don’t speak.” In the end, we shook hands and he left with a deeper peace. That was God’s mercy; but it sure didn’t look like I had expected.

Jesus uses the rich image of the dragnet to capture the truth that as we go through life, we accumulate many things ... possessions, experiences, knowledge, relationships – and sometimes hurts and regrets and sorrow. In prayer and reflection, we too must sort it all out ... set aside time, SIT DOWN, and ask what is useful and what is useless? What is the treasure, and what is just the dirt of the field? Solomon asked wisely ... not to be spared from difficulties by having wealth or power or control, but for the gift of discernment, to see what God was doing in his life and the lives of those around him, and to *know how to choose what God would have him choose*. May we too ask with wisdom – to ask for what Jesus wants to give us; to seek what truly matters; and to knock on the door that leads to the love that is in the heart of Christ. Mercy does not always look like we might expect; but when we can see it, we marvel at its ways.