



APPRECIATING AND SHARING MERCY

"He was...a drinker and a womanizer. When he got \$100 he spent \$110. He went bankrupt and he was left with a lot of debts." This is a description one man offers of another-another whom he and a number of other families worked to support for over forty years. One can easily imagine the hurt feelings and frustration of these hard-working people, but it might be harder to understand why they continued to send this man money year after year. The man was Oskar Schindler. The families were some of the hundreds he saved from the German death camps in the Holocaust.

Today's Gospel relates the familiar story of the Good Samaritan. Since "good" Samaritans are likely the only kind of Samaritans most of us have heard of, it can be hard to hear this story as Jesus' audience did. The Samaritans were a despised group. It would not only have been difficult for a pious Jew to imagine any Samaritan going out of his way to help a Jew, but also unpleasant to imagine having to be on the receiving end of such mercy. If there is one thing less palatable to most of us than helping our enemies, it is finding ourselves in a position in which we need the help of our enemies. The movie *Schindler's List* portrays Jews in the middle of both these situations. They were forced to work in a German munitions factory, unwillingly making the very weapons that would be used against their liberators. Meanwhile, their continued employment there-the one factor which kept them from the concentration camps-meant they were forced to rely on the assistance of a German with a greedy, mercenary reputation. Though the situation was morally reprehensible, it set the stage for dramatic acts of selfless humanitarianism.

We have already experienced more mercy than we can ever repay. The free gift of salvation offered through Jesus is not something humanity anticipated, not even something we asked for. Not even in the deepest lamentations of our ancestors could it be imagined that our pleas for salvation would be answered.

We are commanded to love God, and one another. "Love one another as I have loved you." When we reflect on the story of the Good Samaritan or the events of salvation history, we begin to understand how completely we fail to fulfill Christ's commandment. When we imagine that biting back a bitter word or failing to indulge a certain vice somehow makes us better Christians, we demonstrate instead how poorly we merit the title. Christ's own self-sacrifice is our model-and not merely for those we love, but for our bitterest enemies.

"The Word became flesh to be our model of holiness" (CCC, #459). If we find the conduct of the Good Samaritan difficult to emulate, how much more are we challenged by the example of Jesus? Mercifully, our salvation does not depend upon our conduct. Rather, mindful of Christ's example, we must struggle to honor the gift of salvation by growing in faith, love and good works. We have nothing to offer our merciful God except gratitude; but we do have a great deal to offer our neighbors in need.

We are asked to love even our enemies. Even as the Jew and Samaritan were enemies, we are called to show love to those who make themselves our enemies, whether by hurtful gossip or acts of war. "Forgiveness...bears witness that, in our world, love is stronger than sin" (CCC, #2844). As Christians, we must bear witness to how completely love conquers sin; as it has been done for us, so we must try to do for others.

"If love dwells in you, you have no enemy on earth" (St. Ephraem the Syrian). Jesus' listeners in the Gospel asked who their neighbor was; they could readily list their enemies. The story of the Good Samaritan illustrates that love makes neighbors of all.

Our attitude in living out our Christian faith should not be one of rigorous adherence to precepts, but rather a profound gratitude for all we have received through Christ. If we are ever-mindful of how much we have been given, we will more readily share with those around us.