Be Compassionate

A Jesus-Centered Retreat in Three Movements
in celebration of the Jubilee Year of Mercy

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“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”
(Luke 6:36)

This resource is intended as a self directed retreat. It can be done in a single setting, but we recommend giving yourself three separate times of prayer and reflection, following the movements outlined below.

Before you begin:

1. Find a SUITABLE PLACE, a comfortable chair, maybe a prayer corner with candle, picture or symbol that will be an aid to a prayerful focus.

2. POSTURE: comfortable and relaxing posture -- choose a posture that enables you to be both relaxed and alert. Many postures are suitable for prayer, but as a general principle choose one that will be comfortable for longer periods at a time – having to constantly change position can be a distraction.
   * It may help you to close your eyes and take a few deep breaths to relax and focus your attention. Sometimes the playing of soft instrumental music will help you relax.

3. ADOPT AN ATTITUDE OF SILENCE: Spend a few moments quieting yourself, becoming aware that you are placing yourself in the presence of God in an unhurried way. As you settle down to pray you may have lots of things on our mind. You may be tired, anxious, or tense. Integrate these in your prayer, accept them, be aware of them, and bring them with you into the stillness and silence, within and without.
   * Deliberately notice external sounds, and let them go.
   * Deliberately notice sensations in your body, and let them go.
   * Deliberately notice preoccupations of your mind, and let them go.

4. COME TO PRAYER GENTLY: Simply begin to anticipate your time of meeting God.
Movement #1: Understanding Mercy and Compassion

Light a candle. Open your Bible and set it beside the lit candle. Pause to let silence well up within you. Begin gently and quietly.

Begin with the Sign of the Cross
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Speak these words aloud:
By signing myself with the cross in blessing, I also make a commitment to live in such a way that others might see the goodness in me that is God’s presence.

Patterning Prayer on Jesus
If our prayer life as disciples is to be patterned on that of Jesus, it is very important that we understand Jesus, as presented in the Gospels, as the purveyor of God’s mercy. Jesus challenges us to: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).
In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares: “Blessed are they that show mercy, for mercy shall be theirs” (Matthew 5:7).

In the Gospels, we are presented with the central challenge of mercy and compassion in Jesus. Mercy and compassion are particularly important words in the Gospels. For Jesus, mercy and compassion are the central qualities of God and the central moral quality of life centered in God. Likewise, we are called to be as compassionate and merciful toward everyone we encounter, just as Jesus was.

Mercy and God
Mercy and compassion are not the same. In English, mercy and merciful most commonly imply a superior in relationship to a subordinate and also a situation of wrongdoing: one is merciful toward somebody to whom one has the right or power to act otherwise. God is most merciful. Pope Francis sums this up well, he says: “What a beautiful truth of faith this is for our lives: the mercy of God! God’s love for us is so great, so deep; it is an unfailing love, one which always takes us by the hand and supports us, lifts us up and leads us on.” To paraphrase the poet William Blake, “Mercy wears a human face, and compassion a human heart.”

From Pope Francis:
“God’s mercy can make even the driest land become a garden, can restore life to dry bones. Let us be renewed by God’s mercy, let us be loved by Jesus, let us enable the power of his love to transform our lives too; and let us become agents of mercy, channels through which God can water the earth, protect all creation and make justice and peace flourish.”

“Misericordia” [mercy]. [is] a Latin word meaning...to “give the heart to the wretched.”
to those in need, and to those who are suffering. That is what Jesus did: he opened his heart to the wretchedness of man. The Gospel has a wealth of episodes which present "misericordia" of Jesus, his love freely given for the suffering and the weak" (Address, June 14, 2014).

For Reflection: How has God been merciful to me? How have I attempted to be merciful toward others?

Prayer Starters: “Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me.” (Psalm 57:1). “Be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge” (Psalm 57:1). “The Lord is merciful and gracious” (Psalm 103:8). “The Lord is gracious and merciful” (Psalm 111:4).

The Meaning of the Word Compassion
The English noun compassion comes from the Latin verb (patior) which means “to feel” or “to suffer” with the prefix cum in Latin which means “with.” Compassion means feeling with someone, the feelings of and for somebody else in a visceral way. Most commonly compassion is associated with the feelings and suffering of somebody else and being moved by that suffering to do something. Compassion leads us to act, to be compassionate. “Compassion” does not mean to feel sorry for the person.

From Pope Francis:
“We must have the heart of Jesus, who, “when he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them. I like to dream of a Church who lives the compassion of Jesus” (Address, June 16, 2014).

For Reflection: Do you ever consider that compassion is visceral?

Prayer Starter: “The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made” (Psalm 145:9).

Biblical Roots of Compassion
In the Old Testament which was Sacred Scripture for Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries, the word compassion has rich meaning. In the Hebrew language the word rehem usually translated as “compassion” is a noun that means “womb.” In the Old Testament, compassion is both a feeling and a way of being that flows out of that feeling. Sometimes, the noun for womb rehem is very specifically linked to its association with what a woman feels, compassion for the child of her womb; a man feels compassion for his brother who comes from the same womb. (See 1 Kings 3:26; Genesis 43:30.) As a feeling, compassion is located in a certain part of the body----namely in the loins. In a woman, this means compassion is located in the womb (see Isaiah 49:15); in men, compassion is located in the bowels. Compassion, then, is to be understood as part of your innards, as visceral!
For Reflection: How do I react to the biblical roots of compassion?

Prayer Starter: “Turn, O Lord, How long? Have compassion on your servants” (Psalm 90:13).

Pompeo Batoni: The Prodigal

Look at this picture in your prayer time now. What do you see? Whom do you see? What image of God does this painting suggest to you, gender aside?

In this space write a prayer asking to be given the gift of compassion.
Movement #2: The God of Mercy

If you have taken a break and returned to the second movement, spend a little time recollecting your experience of the first movement. If you are returning, get up, take a drink of water, and when you are fully ready, return.

Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Speak these words aloud:
By signing myself with the cross in blessing, I also make a commitment to live in such a way that others might see the goodness in me that is God’s presence.

God Imaged As Mercy and Merciful
An insightful and moving image for a merciful God is found in the book of Exodus. When Moses asks God to show him his Glory, God responds and says he will pass before him proclaiming the name: “The Lord; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy” (Exodus 33:19). In the very next chapter of Exodus we read about God again passing before Moses saying, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger…” (Exodus 34:6). The prophet Hosea speaking for God exclaims; “I desire mercy not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6). In addition, the psalmist often attributes to God the practice of mercy. “Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord” (Psalm 25:6). “Do not, O Lord, withhold your mercy from me” (Psalm 40:11). “Have mercy on me, O God” (Psalm 51:1). “According to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions” (Psalm 51:1). “Let your mercy come to me so that I may live” (119:77). “Great is your mercy, O Lord” (Psalm 119:156). “Our eyes look to the Lord our God, until he has mercy upon us” (Psalm 123:2). “Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us” (Psalm 123:3). Further, after each verse in Psalm 136, the refrain “For his [God’s] mercy endures forever” is repeated as it narrates the history of God’s saving activity in the lives of his people.

And so Jesus’ statement in the Gospel of Luke: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:36) is rooted in his Jewish tradition as articulated in the Books of Exodus and the Psalms. Mercy then is presented as the central quality of the activity of God. Or as Pope Francis stated in his document convening the Jubilee year of mercy, “In short, the mercy of God is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality through which he reveals his love as that of a father or mother, moved to the very depths out of love for their child” (The Face of Mercy #9).

For Reflection: What does it mean for you to experience the mercy of God?
Prayer Starter: Read Psalm 136, responding after each verse with the refrain “For his mercy endures forever.”
The Gospel of Mercy

One Gospel in particular, the Gospel of Luke, has traditionally merited the title “the Gospel of Mercy.” First of all, the theme of God’s merciful love really ties the whole book together from beginning to end: Mercy is its *leitmotiv* one might say. Secondly, the Gospel contains a cluster of parables in chapter 15 (the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son) which are unique to Luke’s Gospel, and which especially highlight the merciful love of God. Luke places special emphasis on the universal scope of Divine Mercy, portraying it as a distinctive characteristic of the Kingdom of God, dawning upon the world through Jesus Christ.

In its opening chapter, Luke’s Gospel begins with two great canticles, one spoken by a woman the other by a man, in praise of Divine Mercy: the *Magnificat* of Mary and the *Benedictus* of Zechariah. The *Magnificat* is essentially a hymn of Thanksgiving to the God of mercy, who is a God of steadfast love and faithfulness. In chapter 1, verses 46-50, for example, Mary praises God for showering his mercy upon her. “His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation” (Luke 1:50). Mary then praises God in verses 51-55 for his mercy upon the faithful poor of Israel who trusted him to keep his promises. “He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy” (Luke 1:54).

In the *Benedictus* (Luke 1:69-79), Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist and the husband of Elizabeth, praises God for keeping his covenant promises to Israel: “As he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant” (Luke 1:70-72). Thus, Zechariah rejoices that the true Israel will be established, just as God had promised through his prophets. The new Israel will be spiritually renewed in every respect; all this will be the a manifestation of the Lord’s tender mercy: “Through the tender mercy of our God, when the day shall dawn upon us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.” In short, all this comes from the “tender mercy” of God. The phrase used here in the original Greek text is “*splagchna eleous,*” which literally means through the “bowels” or “guts” of God’s “mercy” ---a phrase that expresses how deep the mercy of the Lord for us really is.

So when Jesus challenges us to, “Be Merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36), he wants us to embrace this in our very guts. To be as merciful as God is, which is the challenge given us by Jesus, means we need to both feel it in our gut and be gutsy in our practice of mercy. We need to be as gutsy as the ten lepers who boldly asked for Jesus to cure them saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us” (Luke 17:13). Or the gutsy blind Bartimaeus who refuses to be quiet and shouts “Jesus, Son of David have mercy on me!” (Luke 18:38).
For Reflection: Consider developing an action plan that will make compassion a central quality of your life. Think about how you can live the works of mercy more faithfully.

Prayer Starter: Gracious and compassionate God, help me to be a gracious receiver of your compassion toward me. Help me to be compassionate toward others.

Aimé Morot (1880): The Good Samaritan

It's time for some action!
Pause here in this second movement to make a decision for compassion. Think about the world around you. Who is waiting for a word of love and care? Whose pain have you failed to feel? Who have you found it possible to ignore, enjoying the comforts of your own life while suffering rages around you?

Take one step today. Grow in compassion for others by practicing compassion in your life.
Movement #3: Gospel Stories of Jesus and the Mercy and Compassion of God

If you have taken a break and returned to the third movement, spend a little time recollecting your experience of the second movement. If you are continuing, get up, stretch, take a drink of water, and when you are fully ready, return.

Begin with the Sign of the Cross
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Speak these words aloud:
By signing myself with the cross in blessing, I also make a commitment to live in such a way that others might see the goodness in me that is God’s presence.

Jesus! Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus mediating the mercy and compassion of God. He did this in a variety of ways.

Jesus ate meals with social outcasts like Zacchaeus the tax collector (Luke 19:2-19). Why did Jesus eat a meal with this hated tax collector? Because Jesus could “feel with” Zacchaeus the hate people extended toward him and, instead of continuing to hate, Jesus did what God would do and broke bread with Zacchaeus. The ethos of mercy and compassion led Jesus to include all in his table fellowship.

For Reflection: With whom do I need to break bread so as to share God’s mercy and compassion with him or her?

One of the most powerful stories about Jesus being compassionate and merciful is his encounter with the widow of Nain, which appears only in the Gospel of Luke (see Luke 7:11-15). This story tells of the tragedy of the loss of a child, in this case a young man. It is a heartbreak that a mother experiences differently than anyone else. Jesus knew this, so he raises her son from the dead. She said nothing, yet Jesus knew the ache she was experiencing and he with her. He felt it in his bowels; in his innards Jesus knew that in the society of the day, she would be powerless as a widow----a woman with no man in her life in that patriarchal society was rendered pauperized, impoverished, and defenseless. But Jesus saw her with the merciful and compassionate eyes of God and, not only returned her son to her, but also her dignity, worth, and meaning.
From Pope Francis
“The apostle James teaches that our mercy toward others will vindicate us on the day of God’s judgment: “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy, yet mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:12-13) (Joy of the Gospel).

For Reflection: How and when have I experienced the mercy and compassion of Jesus in my own life? Consider developing an action plan that will make mercy a central quality of your life.

More Gospel Stories of Jesus being Merciful and Compassionate
One of the best known parables of Jesus is that of the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10:29-37. Jesus describes the actions of the Samaritan toward the person who was attacked by robbers and left to die on the side of the road. These actions of the Samaritan include bandaging his wounds, pouring oil on them, loading the victim onto an animal and taking him to an inn, and paying for him. These are the very actions God would have done. Jesus asks the lawyer (an expert in Jewish law) who he thinks was neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers. He responds: “The one who showed him mercy. Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).

In the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), it states that the father in the story, who represents God, saw his younger son in the distance returning home and was filled with compassion and ran to him (Luke 15:20). In the story, the father was disturbed at the loss of his son in his very bowels, in his entrails, in his innards. Compassion is quite visceral.

Return now to the image and questions on page 4. Spend some time reflecting and praying about mercy in light of what this story tells us about God.

Jesus is merciful and compassionate toward two blind men of Jericho (see Matthew 20:29-34) when they cry out twice: “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” (Matthew 20:30) and again in verse 31 “Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!” The two men asked Jesus to restore their sight. “Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him” (Matthew 20:34).

Some of the other Gospel stories of Jesus being merciful and compassionate include Matthew 9:36-37 where Jesus has compassion toward those who were harassed and helpless. In Matthew 14:14 (see also 15:32-38; Mark 8:2; 6:34) Jesus again has compassion for the crowd and cures the sick. Likewise in Mark 6:34 Jesus has compassion on the crowds for they are like sheep without a shepherd.
Jesus’ birth, life, ministry, passion and death, and resurrection are the ultimate expression of the mercy and compassion of God. He was sent as a vulnerable one into our cold world, calling forth mercy and compassion for the weak, as he still does.

For Reflection: Having read about the Gospel stories of Jesus being compassionate, which one is your favorite? Reread it and try to imagine yourself in the story as one receiving Jesus’ loving mercy and compassion.

Prayer Starter: Jesus, help me to live a life filled with mercy and compassion patterned on your life. Help me to integrate forgiveness and compassion in all I do.

Disciples of Jesus & Mercy and Compassion
To be a disciple of Jesus is to be shaped by mercy and compassion. To be the Church is to be a community that is merciful and compassionate towards all. As Pope Francis reminds us: “The church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven, and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel” (The Joy of the Gospel).

And if we would be like Jesus in our lives, we will dedicate ourselves to seeking out the ones who dwell in the indignity of poverty; or in a cardboard box under a bridge; or those who are imprisoned in body, mind, or spirit. It is we who are to make God’s merciful embrace of everyone else something more than a fairytale. It is we who are challenged to hold close to us those who most need to be soothed, warmed, reassured, and consoled. Why? Because all of us recall that God dared to do the same for us. God did it over two thousand years ago in Jesus. God does it still and God will do it to the end of time. The only means God has to do this today is through us. Are we as merciful and compassionate toward others as God is merciful and compassionate toward us?

Concluding Prayer & Reflection
Gracious and compassionate God, I thank you for this time together on this retreat. Help me to go forth now and grow in my practice of compassion so I can become a disciple of your Son Jesus.

How as a baptized follower of Jesus will I go forth from this retreat changed? What new behaviors will I practice?