

## *Christian Perspectives on Mercy*

To many people today, the idea of a talk emphasizing the place of *mercy* in Christianity will seem to them odd, perplexing, unexpected, and perhaps almost laughable. Because, for many of our contemporaries, Christianity in the last couple of generations has taken on, at least in the public sphere, a tone of condemnation, of harsh moral judgement, and of repudiation of those whose lifestyles, actions or identities are rejected as incorrect, immoral or incompatible with Christianity's worldview, and with the Bible itself. We don't have to look very far, or back too long in history, to see ways in which Christianity has been at the forefront of the so-called "culture wars" here in the West, publicly and vocally speaking out on a range of issues that have generally included abortion and euthanasia, homosexuality and same-sex marriage, artificial insemination and the place of religion in government and public life. For many people—and especially for many of our younger generations<sup>1</sup>—Christianity has become associated with a shrill and harsh public voice which *excludes* and *condemns* in very black-and-white ways ... the very *opposite* of what *mercy* is usually taken to mean. Christianity is seen by many as a faith that primarily teaches "thou shalt not's" ... that is about a type of clear-cut moral self-righteousness that keeps its distance from the messiness, the corruption, the compromises and grey areas of our world, which risk "tainting" it. It holds the bar very high—and woe to those who are unable, or unwilling, to follow the way of life it preaches.

... all of which, to me, as a Catholic Christian, strikes me as profoundly sad, profoundly caricatured, and profoundly inaccurate. Because for me, *mercy* is at the very core of the faith that guides my life. It is a defining quality of Christianity, and I cannot imagine it ever being otherwise.

Fortunately, I am not *alone* in that opinion. There is a certain former archbishop of Buenos Aires who now lives full-time in Rome, who recently wrote:

"Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. The Church's very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love ... Wherever the Church is present, the mercy of [God] the Father must be evident. In our parishes, communities, associations and movements, in a word, wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy".

Of course, that former archbishop of Buenos Aires is none other than Pope Francis, and that quote is taken from his recent document *Misericordiae Vultus*, "The Face of Mercy,"

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, "Study: Youth see Christians as judgmental, anti-gay"; [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2007-10-10-10-christians-young\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2007-10-10-10-christians-young_N.htm)

in which he decreed that, from the beginning of December 2015 to the end of November 2016, the Catholic Church throughout the world would spend a full year actively reflecting on, and trying to practice even more deliberately, the virtue of mercy. It would be, he said, a Jubilee Year, of the type the Catholic Church normally celebrates only every quarter-century ... a *Jubilee of Mercy*, when Catholics around the world would focus on re-learning what mercy is, what it looks like, and how it should characterize the life and presence of the Catholic faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, and then in every Catholic cathedral in the world, the Pope asked that "Holy Doors of Mercy" be opened, symbolizing the welcome of the Church to *all*. And in this letter, *Misericordiae Vultus*, he provides a beautiful reflection on mercy—in the Bible, in Christianity and in the lives of every Christian—which I can highly recommend to anyone who wants to enter into the spirit of this year, and wants to make our world a little more *merciful*, a little more *generous*, a little more *compassionate*. And I don't think there's anyone who would debate that those are things our world needs quite a bit *more* of.

*The Church as "an oasis of mercy"*. That's what Pope Francis wants Catholicism—and, by extension, the whole Christian community—to be. And so I'm grateful to Scarborough Missions' Interfaith Department—which is made up of my good friends and partners—for initiating and sponsoring these public talks on the theme of *mercy* in the three Abrahamic religions. There are many things about which three our faiths *differ*. But *mercy* is one of the things about which we are surprisingly—or perhaps *unsurprisingly*—united, and about which Judaism, Christianity and Islam can speak with a common voice. And it is *that* voice, I believe, that we are called to offer to our society today because, according to Pope Francis's diagnosis, mercy is a quality that has often slipped from the radar-screen of our society ... that we too often are *forgetting* about, and which we, as religious believers and leaders, have a particular responsibility to keep placing before people, if our faiths are going to be authentic, and if they are going to try and be a positive, life-giving influence in our contemporary world.

Pope Francis believes, and I believe too, that mercy is *a* central pillar—and arguably *the* central pillar—of Christianity. So tonight I would like to explore with you some of what I believe are the three *main sources* from which Christianity derives its particular understanding of mercy. By looking at them, even briefly, I think we will be able to see what Christianity *means* by that word, on a philosophical level, but, even more importantly, what mercy *looks like* in the lives of Christians. Because the Pope makes it clear that *real* mercy can never be just a theoretical exercise. Mercy is a virtue that exists only *in practice*, only when *real* people exercise it, as so many exemplary Christians have for 2000 years. If we stay merely on the level of *words* and *ideas*, we will never penetrate adequately into Christian mercy, which is very much "hands-on" ... and very, very different from the standard caricatures of Christianity that many people have absorbed, but which bear no resemblance to *my* faith or, I suspect, the faith of roughly 2.2 billion people around the world. Christianity *must* be merciful, or else it ceases to be Christianity. Pope Francis clearly believes that, and I believe it as well. I hope that tonight

I can share some of the reasons *why* we believe that ... why Christianity is a religion of mercy, and cannot be otherwise.

I guess the first thing to state is the obvious: that the story of Christianity does not *begin* with Christianity. It begins centuries *before* the time of Jesus, in the life of our Jewish brothers and sisters, who were the ancestors of Jesus Christ, and within whose faith tradition He absorbed so much of His *own* understanding of mercy. Jesus Christ, whom we Christians profess to be “God from God and light from light,” and yet who is both fully human and fully divine. And it was in *that* humanity that He learned, and prayed, and absorbed the message of God’s mercy from the Scriptures of His people, where it was *already* a central message. So the first major source of Christian understanding of mercy is Judaism, and especially the Old Testament.

The Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, are steeped in a long lived awareness of God’s mercy, and they possess a rich, nuanced vocabulary for speaking about it. But the two most common terms that get rendered as “mercy” in English are the Hebrew words *hesed* and *rah̄amim*, two words that are frustratingly hard to translate because they contain within themselves so many related concepts that no single English word properly captures. *Hesed*: the unshakeable love, kindness and faithfulness of God, rooted in His covenant relationship with the Jewish people and their descendants, a love and mercy that are timeless and can be counted upon without question, which for millennia has resonated in the Psalms with the repeated Hebrew refrain כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ, *kî l’ôlām ḥasdô*: “for God’s mercy endures forever”. The Bible was clear that so many things were transitory and unreliable—but God’s mercy was the one thing that ancient Israel could put their trust in, and did. *Hesed*: the benevolence of a loyal and provident sovereign who cared for His people in their weakness and need, who never abandoned them because, as St. Paul would later write, “God never revokes His gifts and His calling”.

*Rah̄amim*, too, is a rich and multi-layered word. Rooted in the Hebrew word *reḥem*, a mother’s womb, it connotes that bond of tenderness, compassion, devotion and infinite generosity that ideally links a mother to her child, and which thus characterizes God as embodying all that is best and most beautiful about both father *and* mother. It is one of the powerful ways that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are linked linguistically, for it is essentially the same word that classical Arabic uses twice when it begins almost every chapter of the Qur’an with the phrase called the *Bismillah*: *Bismillah hir-Rah̄man nir-Rah̄im*, “In the name of God, who shows mercy most generously, and is mercy itself”—or, God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. When, in Exodus 34, Moses calls upon God to reveal Himself, God does so in these words: “I am the LORD, the God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness”. And “the God of compassion” is, in Hebrew, “the God of *rah̄amim*”. The “wombly compassion” of God: that’s *rah̄amim*.

I don’t want to overstep my topic and delve into materials that my Jewish and Muslim colleagues will be presenting in the weeks ahead. But I *do* want to emphasize how *central*

God's mercy is to any understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures, and Judaism itself, and what a rich concept it is, rooted in their long and complex journey with that God. And it is a concept that links Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

So we shouldn't be surprised that mercy is a major theme of the preaching and teaching of Jesus. As a devout Jew, it was a concept that had been drilled into Him from His youngest childhood. Far from the stereotype of the Old Testament God as a God of wrath, violence and judgement, some of the most tender and significant descriptions of God's *mercy* come to us from the Old Testament. The first foundation for Christian ideas of mercy is the Hebrew Bible. But I will leave that for Rabbi Ed Elkin to discuss *next* Tuesday in much more detail, I'm sure!

The second component of Christian understanding of mercy is the person of Jesus Himself—His words and His example, as they have been passed down to us in the Gospels. Drawing upon the rich heritage of His people's reflections on mercy, Jesus speaks repeatedly about mercy—mercy as an attribute of *God*, and mercy as a disposition that must characterize His followers, if they are truly following His teachings. In Greek, "mercy" is expressed through two main clusters of words: those connected with the noun *eleos*, and with the verb *eleēō*, meaning "mercy" and "to show mercy"; and those connected with the verb *oiktirō*, "to be compassionate". The *eleos* group is considerably larger with dozens of occurrences in the New Testament, but both sets of words are closely linked. One of the shortest and oldest Christian prayers, *Kyrie eleison*, "Lord, have mercy," is based on those words—although many Catholics who can remember the old Latin Mass probably assumed it was Latin! Nope ... Greek!

In Matthew 23:23, when He challenges people who have become overly concerned with the tiny details of the Jewish commandments—who have, He believes, "lost the forest for the trees," Jesus reminds them that the "weightier matters of the Law" are justice, faithfulness—and *mercy*, that *these* are the essential qualities of the Jewish tradition, properly understood. They are certainly qualities that were central to the message of the Hebrew prophets, and Jesus quotes their words when He reminds His listeners to be more focused on mercy than merely on sacrifice. After the Romans' destruction of the great Temple of Jerusalem in the year 70, it was *acts of mercy* that the leading rabbis said would become the replacement for the now-vanished sacrifices.

Among the Beatitudes, which are such a central expression of Jesus' teaching, mercy finds pride of place. *Beati misericordes*, one of the Beatitudes says in Latin: Blessed are the merciful ones, because, the Greek literally says, "they shall be mercied"—Biblical language for: "for God will show His mercy to them". There is a mysterious *reciprocity* to mercy, Jesus says, and in being merciful, we are engaging in *imitatio Dei*, in imitating God Himself: "Be merciful, just as your heavenly Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

But it is perhaps in Jesus' parables, most of all, that His teaching about mercy is most concrete and most poignant. And I think that there are three in particular that focus on what mercy looks like in the life of a Christ-follower: the parable of the Prodigal Son; the parable of the Good Samaritan; and the parable of the Last Judgement.

We all know the story of the Prodigal Son, from Luke chapter 15—how a father's young and foolhardy son humiliates his father and his family by demanding his inheritance, which he then promptly squanders in a far-off country with wild living, until he is reduced to feeding pigs—a task that would have horrified any kosher-observant Jew. And when he makes up his mind to return to his father and seek work as a hired hand, he is astonished to discover that, instead of berating him and humiliating him, instead it is his father who takes the first step, running out to meet his wayward, scraggly son, throwing his arms around him, kissing him and ordering his servants to dress him in the best clothes, put a ring on his finger, and prepare a lavish banquet to welcome him home. One of the greatest expressions of mercy lies in *forgiveness*—and especially in forgiving those whom we judge *unworthy* of that forgiveness. And yet, Jesus says, the mercy of God is like that of the Prodigal Son's father, who is more concerned with the *forgiveness* than with the *sin*, and whose love overflows so much that the repentant sinner becomes the cause of lavish rejoicing. "For this son of mine," the father says, "was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found again". For 2000 years, Christians have reflected on that powerful story as perhaps *the* paradigm of the kind of mercy Christians are meant to show in forgiving others, even when it may seem foolhardy, naïve and indulgent in the eyes of the world. This is what *God's* mercy looks like, Jesus says: now go and act similarly.

The second parable, that of the Good Samaritan, is found in Luke chapter 10, and speaks of mercy found in expected places and unexpected people. For centuries, the Samaritans and the Jews had been distant and totally estranged cousins, hurling insults at each other's religious and cultural practices, and even avoiding each other's territory whenever possible. And yet, in this parable, when a man is robbed and beaten and left for dead by the side of the road a few miles outside Jerusalem, it is *not* the fine and upstanding religious leaders—the expected heroes—who care for the wounded Jewish man. It is, to everyone's surprise, a *Samaritan*, a resented foreigner, who acts with tenderness, compassion and generosity, who binds up the man's wounds, brings him to an inn and pays for his care. "Which one," Jesus asks, "was a neighbour to the injured man"—and the answer is "The one who *showed him mercy*". "Go and do likewise," Jesus says. *Show mercy to others*. Be kind even to your enemies. Avoid hatred and resentment and intolerance and selfishness. Mercy lies in reaching out *even* to those who may have no rightful claim on our generosity. Mercy *looks* very different from the values and criteria of the world.

The third parable is the story of the Last Judgement. When God will judge all of humanity at the end of time, those who are righteous are *surprised* to be rewarded by God, who says

that they offered *God Himself* food when He was hungry, drink when He was thirsty, shelter when He was a stranger, clothing when He was naked, care when He was sick, and a visit when He was imprisoned. The righteous are stunned to hear this, and they ask how that can be—to which God replies, “To the degree you did it to the least of my brothers or sisters, you did it to me”. Those who have acted with compassion and generosity toward the needy, the poor and the marginalized are honoured by God and rewarded with eternal life. And once again, the message of Jesus is clear: go now and do likewise. And so care for those on the fringes of society, for the weak, the suffering and the vulnerable, has been inscribed into the Christian tradition from its very beginnings, because it was inscribed in Judaism before, but even more so, because Jesus has made it such a touchstone of His own ministry and teaching. Christian hospitals and hospices, Christian care for prisoners and the homeless, for the hungry and the poor, is as old as Christianity itself, and it stands at the root of much of our contemporary Canadian network of social services.

So the second pillar of Christianity’s understanding of mercy is anchored in Jesus of Nazareth, in His example and His message—a message centred on *receiving* and *extending* forgiveness, on reaching out with love, even to the supposedly unlovable, and on generosity, compassion, solidarity and kindness toward those who found themselves in any form of need.

And that second pillar leads directly to the third: to the lives of some of the exemplary Christian figures that many of us refer to as “saints”—people who have put Jesus’ teachings into practice in particularly radiant ways, who incarnate His values and His example, and who challenge us Christians in terms of how well *we* are living out our own Christian vocations.

I would like to briefly touch tonight on three figures who, I believe, capture beautifully what those aspects of mercy *ought to* look like in the life of a genuine Christian. And they are: St. Lawrence the Deacon; Dorothy Day; and the Trappist monk Father Christian de Chergé.

Everyone knows the St. Lawrence River. But relatively few know the saint for whom it was named. St. Lawrence lived in Rome in the mid-third century, and he was one of the seven papal deacons who cared for the poor and the hungry of the Eternal City on behalf of the Pope, the Bishop of Rome. When the Pope, Pope Sixtus, was arrested by the Roman imperial authorities in one of the early persecutions of the Church, Lawrence was quickly arrested as well. The Romans knew from following his charitable work that he had access to considerable financial resources, and they imagined that he must know the location of the golden vessels and gems that were part of the riches of the underground Roman Church. The governor had Lawrence brought before him, and he told him that he had 24 hours to assemble the treasures of the Church and bring them to the governor, or else risk execution. And the legend says that Lawrence left the governor, and immediately

went and collected up all the gold and silver and gemstones he had access to, *sold* it all, and spent those 24 hours distributing the proceeds to the poor and the hungry on the streets of Rome. And then, he gathered dozens of those same poor, sick and suffering citizens, appeared before the governor, and declared to the startled Roman magistrate: “You asked me to produce the wealth of the Church ... so here they are”—with a wave of his hand. The governor was convinced that Lawrence was mocking him, and he was so enraged, the legend says, that he ordered Lawrence to be roasted alive on a metal grill. Today, a small church in the centre of Rome, San Lorenzo in Lucina, commemorates Lawrence’s courage—and his mercy. And every deacon in the Church knows and cherishes Lawrence’s memory, because he embodies beautifully and powerfully a foundational part of their *own* ministry, which is outreach to the poor and needy, and the performance of the corporal works of mercy, just as their forebear Lawrence did almost 1800 years ago. Lawrence understood that the poor, the hungry, the naked and the stranger were not a social problem to be tolerated, or mere unfortunates to be looked down on condescendingly, but his brothers and sisters, the living presence of Christ right in front of his eyes, who he was called to care for with generosity, compassion ... *and mercy*. He didn’t reject or ignore the poor ... He *treasured* them. And he *paid* for that countercultural mercy with his *life*. For 1700 years, Lawrence, the deacon of Rome, has been one of the great faces of mercy for Christians.

When Pope Francis visited the United States back in early November, his speech to the U.S. Congress was peppered with references to twentieth-century American Catholic figures. And one of the people that the media were intrigued to hear him cite was Dorothy Day.

Although she is maybe a bit forgotten today, Dorothy Day was one of the major public figures of American Catholicism in the twentieth century. Born in 1897, Dorothy Day was a journalist, an adult convert to Catholicism, and a prominent social activist for most of her life. In 1917, she was arrested for the first time, for being part of a demonstration that called for the right of American women to vote. In the 1920s, she studied and wrote, and become involved in various Communist and socialist movements. But, after experiencing the support and welcome of Catholic Sisters when she was an expectant single mother, she grew to love the Catholic Church, and eventually asked to be baptized in December 1927.

For the rest of her life, Dorothy Day channelled her physical and spiritual energy into meeting the needs of the poor, and pushing for the kinds of social reforms that would bring about greater equity and justice in society. In the 1930s, she was one of the co-founders of the Catholic Worker movement, which brought together hundreds of young adults to serve the homeless and the poor, to run soup kitchens and provide shelters. The Catholic Worker movement was also known for its newspaper, which sold hundreds of thousands of copies in its heyday, and also for its commitment to pacifism in wartime. What *had* been mere political activism in her youth blossomed, for Dorothy Day, into a

new type of commitment to cultural change, deeply rooted in the teachings of Jesus, and the faith of the Church. She was a deeply devout and, in many ways, very traditional Catholic her whole life.

But she was also a fierce opponent of injustice and violence, wherever she came upon it. She challenged Church and political leaders to be attentive to the needs of the poor, and she herself lived a life of extreme simplicity and personal poverty that inspired many of her colleagues. She proposed peaceful civil disobedience during World War II, and she was an ardent and outspoken opponent of America's involvement in the Vietnam War, and her positions often brought her into conflict with bishops and cardinals, who saw her views as un-patriotic and excessive. Although many people linked her to the hippie movement of the 1960s, Dorothy Day was actually rather critical of some of their views, and what she saw as an emphasis on selfish decadence. She supported the rights of immigrants and farmworkers, at a time when those were highly controversial topics in America.

It was only in her 70s and 80s that Dorothy Day began to capture the ear, and the imagination, of mainstream Christianity in the United States. Newspapers and magazines published articles about her views, and her commitment to the poor, to justice and to peace-making. By the time she died in 1980, she was widely revered as the grandmother of the Christian social justice movement, and her campaigns had been instrumental in bringing about significant changes in various government policies and social structures. She died as simply as she had lived, in a Catholic Worker rooming house, in a room next door to a bag lady. The American bishops have repeatedly pointed to her as an example of Catholic commitment to justice and peace-making, and have held her up as a passionate advocate for structural change based on Gospel principles. When Pope Francis cited her approvingly in his speech in D.C., he was merely echoing the thoughts of many, many Catholic Americans. Dorothy Day's cause for canonization has been opened in Rome, and she is already recognized as a "Servant of God," the first step toward sainthood.

Dorothy Day was deeply impatient with injustice, and with those who refused to challenge it. To her, the Gospel had *social* implications, and not merely *personal* ones. To her, complacency was the worst enemy of Christian involvement in society, and on more than one occasion, she said, "No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless ... There's too much work to do!" Like St. Francis of Assisi, Dorothy Day took Jesus seriously when he asked the rich man to sell all his treasures and give the money to the poor. She dedicated her life, not just to serving the poor, but to striving so that there would be fewer and fewer poor people to serve in the first place. Karl Marx famously called religion the "opiate of the masses," because it numbed people to the fact of suffering and made them complacent and powerless. Dorothy Day could not have been more *unlike* the kind of Christianity Marx was critiquing; for her, Christianity demanded activism, and

demanded speaking up. It was radically countercultural, the leaven of society, challenging it to be different and more caring, more inclusive ... more *merciful*.

The third figure is Father Christian de Chergé, who is another figure who, although inspiring and worthy of attention, is largely unknown, or unremembered, today.

Christian de Chergé was a Trappist monk from France, who for many years had lived in a monastery in Algeria called Notre-Dame de l'Atlas, with about 10 of his brother monks, eventually becoming their abbot, or community superior. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Islamic extremism began to sweep over parts of Algeria, targeting foreigners, especially non-Muslims. The Trappist monastery, which also served as a pharmacy and clinic for the local town of Tibhirine, began to receive death threats from the extremist groups. The monks met and discussed the situation: should they leave, or should they stay? In the end, they decide that their presence as a quiet sign of God's love for their Algerian Muslim neighbours was to be their priority. They knew very well the risk they were taking by staying.

On the night of March 26, 1996, armed gunmen burst into the monastery and kidnapped 7 of the monks. For two months, the world watched and waiting and prayed for their safe return ... but it was not to be. In late May, their bodies were found ... they had been savagely beheaded by their captors.

Weeks later, it will revealed that Christian de Chergé, had left a letter, to be opened in the event of his death ... his last will and testament. When it was published, this was what it said, in part:

If it should happen one day—and it could be today—that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to swallow up all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, my family, to remember that my life was given to God and to this country. I ask them to accept that the One Master of all life was not a stranger to this brutal departure. I ask them to pray for me ... and I ask them to associate such a death with the many other deaths that were just as violent, but forgotten through indifference and anonymity.

I should like, when the time comes, to have a moment of clarity which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of all my fellow human beings, *and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down ...* But how I could rejoice if this people I love were to be accused indiscriminately of my murder? It would be to pay too dearly for what will, perhaps, be called “the grace of martyrdom,” to owe it to an Algerian, whoever he may be, especially if he says he is acting in fidelity to what he believes to be Islam ... I know also the caricature of Islam which a certain kind of Islamism encourages. I know what I have received in Algeria, in the respect of believing Muslims—finding there so often that true strand of the Gospel I learned at my mother's knee, my very first Church.

... In this “thank you,” which is said for everything in my life from this point forward, I certainly include you, friends of yesterday and today, and you my friends of this place, along with my mother and father, my brothers and sisters and their families ... And you also, the friend of my final moment, who could not be aware of what you were doing. Yes, for you also I wish this “thank you”—and this adieu—to commend you to the God whose face I see in yours. And may we find each other, happy “good thieves,” in Paradise, if it pleases God, who is the Father of us both. Amen.

Faced with the possibility of assassination for his religious faith, Christian de Chergé said that he not only pre-emptively *pardoned* his assassin, but hoped that he and his assassin would one day meet in heaven ... both of them as “good thieves” forgiven by God for their sins, and together for eternity in the loving mercy of God. Especially in the light of so many painful events since 9/11, Christian de Chergé’s witness to mercy in the face of evil and violence speaks eloquently and beautifully, and challenges us to forgive others as well—and not to succumb to paranoia, fear and prejudice of “the Other”.

There is much more that could be said about the idea of mercy in Christianity; whole learned books have been written on that topic. But I hope that perhaps I have succeeded in giving a very basic summary of what mercy means for us as Christians, where we find our inspiration for understanding it, and what it looks like in real life, through the example of some truly inspiring figures who *understood* mercy and lived it in ways that continue to challenge the rest of us.

There is no denying that, in many times and places, we as Christians have not always been the best messengers, or the best lived witnesses, of mercy. Sometimes Christianity has seemed—at least publicly—more linked to power, prestige, laws and control than to welcome, generosity, compassion and abundant forgiveness. Sometimes we have communicated messages that, in retrospect, can seem almost *anti-mercy*. But that is precisely *why* Pope Francis has proposed this special Jubilee Year of Mercy ... *not* because mercy is a new or novel concept to Christians, but because we need, *all* of us, occasional reminders of that ... “remedial classes” in Christianity 101. And when we delve into that, into the sources of Christian and its most authentic instincts, we inevitably find mercy at its heart. Mercy is at the heart of Christianity because it was first at the heart of Judaism and the Old Testament. Mercy is at the heart of Christianity because it was so foundational to Jesus’ message, and to the way He interacted with people. Mercy is at the heart of Christianity because, in our best moments, Christians like St. Lawrence, like Dorothy Day, and like Christian de Chergé “got it” ... *got* that Christianity *needed* to be a religion of forgiveness, generosity and compassion if it was going to be faithful to its own deepest identity. Have we always *lived* that out? Not always. And yet, in every generation, Christians—*many* Christians—have lived out that calling to be merciful and compassionate, often in quiet, heroic and self-sacrificing ways. They are our neighbours and our friends, our teachers and our students, our brothers and sisters, our parents and

our children. Some are part of what we call the “institutional Church,” but the vast majority will never be on the front pages of a newspaper or magazine, which is probably just as it *should* be. Because if there is one thing that Jesus is eminently clear about, it is that good works must be done, *not* to impress human beings, but simply because it is what God summons us to, and even if no one but God sees and knows, that is already *enough*.

I hope that this evening can be a worthwhile contribution to the worldwide efforts being made to make this a special year, within Catholicism, but also in all the other communities that Catholicism touches—and that Scarboro Missions touches in particular. I think that mercy offers a particularly rich vein for our interfaith efforts to mine, and so I am thrilled that tonight is just the beginning of a three-night series on mercy in the three Abrahamic faiths. This is exactly the kind of thing Pope Francis explicitly invited us to do when he announced the Jubilee of Mercy almost a year ago now. These are *his* words:

I trust that this Jubilee year celebrating the mercy of God will foster an encounter with [Judaism and Islam], and with other noble religious traditions; may it open us to even more fervent dialogue so that we might know and understand one another better; may it eliminate every form of closed-mindedness and disrespect, and drive out every form of violence and discrimination. (*Misericordiae Vultus*, #23)

In a world that often tries to keep religions apart, and that emphasizes what divides and separates, *mercy* is unquestionably part of what *unites and binds us together*. If this year can make us better friends, more open to each other, more welcoming of those who are different, more generous *together* to those who need our kindness—like the 25,000 Syrian refugees who now call Canada home—then this will have been a Jubilee truly worth celebrating. If it is with the eyes of *mercy* that we come to see each other, and not the eyes of judgement or suspicion, then Pope Francis will be pleased ... and the God of us all will be pleased as well.

Thank you for your kindness, and for your presence here this evening.

