IN A NUTSHELL

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The works of mercy in baffling times

By David Gibson
Catholic News Service

"This is the time for mercy." The present moment is the right time, a "favorable time," to practice the works of mercy -- "to heal wounds" and discover how to forgive and be reconciled with "everyone."

Pope Francis made these points in a homily April 11, 2015, as he looked ahead to the Holy Year of Mercy set to begin nearly eight months later in the worldwide church.

Naturally, every moment is a "time for mercy," just as every moment for Christians is the right time to live the Gospel.

Yet, as I write this in November, shortly after terrorists killed some 130 people in Paris, the world's atmosphere is clouded from continent to continent by fierce feelings of anger. This moment in time is dominated by tremendous fears of added attacks.

Terrorism on the world stage illustrates just how complicated and challenging the Christian call to mercy is. What does it mean, or perhaps not mean, to act mercifully in a world like this one?

Do we still welcome the stranger or refugee, for example, thus practicing a key corporal work of mercy? Many also wonder how to practice the spiritual works of mercy now, not only comforting afflicted people but patiently bearing with those who "do us ill."

The Holy Year of Mercy arrived Dec. 8, preceded by days that, for the world at large, were a dispiriting moment in time. Undoubtedly, though, this will prove an opportune time for penetrating explorations in the faith community of what the Gospel call to love enemies implies or what forms compassion should assume in the actual world we inhabit.

Pope Francis realized in planning the Year of Mercy that it would take place in a time "of great historical change." He hoped it might be a time "to offer more evident signs of God's presence" in this world.

Most people confront the all-too-real challenges of mercy close to home and not on the world stage. But that does not necessarily diminish the difficulty of acting compassionately toward others whose behavior hardly seems to invite this or of forgiving past wrongs done to us.

Is memory an opponent of mercy? It could be sometimes. The memory of feeling insulted or humiliated by someone can survive far into the future -- perhaps the put-down truly was unjust.

This could pose a difficulty for one of the spiritual works of mercy, the forgiveness of offenses. In his message for the 2016 World Youth Day in Poland, Pope Francis said:

"One of the most obvious works of mercy, and perhaps the most difficult to put into practice, is to forgive those who have offended us, who have done us wrong or whom we consider to be enemies."

But mercy, he stressed, "is the only way to overcome evil. Justice is necessary, very much so, but by itself it is not enough. Justice and mercy must go together."

Clearly, it can be difficult to establish habits of mercy. Many other human habits take root slowly too -- like the habit of good posture that my physical therapist insists upon for the well-being of my back. In a similar vein, Pope Francis insists that "to let go of anger, wrath, violence and revenge is a necessary condition for living joyfully."
Some habits of mercy target the physical well-being of others. These corporal works of mercy aim to assuage hunger, quench thirst, welcome strangers, heal the sick, visit prisoners, put clothes on the backs of those who need them or provide burial for the dead.

Other habits of mercy target a person's heart and soul. Known as spiritual works of mercy, they endeavor, in the words of Pope Francis, to "counsel the doubtful, teach the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the sorrowful, forgive offences, patiently bear with troublesome people and pray to God for the living and the dead."

Obviously, based on this list, the range of merciful actions is broad. But it is broader still, because a single work of mercy, like healing the sick, can be practiced in numerous ways.

A story told in the book "Grieving With Your Whole Heart" makes this point. Jamal Rahman, a Muslim imam who has served on Jesuit-run Seattle University's adjunct faculty, recalled a conversation with a terminally ill friend, who said to him:

"If you feel awkward, feel awkward. That is healing to me. If you feel like crying, cry. That is healing to me. ... If you feel you really want to tell me something, talk to me. Your words are healing to me."

It may be necessary, then, to discover how to act mercifully by listening carefully to others and, as Pope Francis repeatedly recommends, accompanying them. Then the amazing range of ways to quench thirsts or satisfy hungers can rise to the surface.

This is what the Holy Year of Mercy involves. It invites profound reflection on the demands of mercy in baffling times. It also prompts believers to rediscover mercy's power to bring needed healing into the world right around them.

(Gibson served on Catholic News Service's editorial staff for 37 years.)

A work of mercy: Sometimes, it's a wake-up call

By Mike Nelson
Catholic News Service

Corporal and spiritual works of mercy can be defined, simply, as acts that offer God's compassion and mercy for those in need. Such actions, I would add, model the person and respond to the call of Jesus Christ.

That may seem a superfluous addition, but I think it more fully explains why we perform works of mercy. And it broadens the scope of what a "work of mercy" is all about.

Many years ago, I attended a parish renewal in which, near the end, we were asked to reflect on and then share how we were going to live our faith and be Christ in the world.

A young woman spoke of a problem in her neighborhood that had bothered her for some time, a problem she'd complained about but had never tried to address through action.

"But it's occurred to me this weekend," she said, "that I can do one of two things: I can keep complaining and do nothing, or I can get involved and take action to fix the problem. I don't think Jesus would want me sitting around waiting for someone else to do it. If I have the gift and the ability to help fix the problem, that's what I should do."

I never found out if she'd been able to fix that problem. But her response got me thinking: If there's a problem, help fix it, and use what God gave you.

A few weeks later, I attended our parish's Good Friday liturgy, having just seen "Jesus of Nazareth" on TV and feeling overwhelmed by the scenes of Christ's passion -- and, naively I suppose, expecting to feel that power when Christ's passion was proclaimed during the Liturgy of the Word.

But the lector reading the "narrator" part seemed not the least bit affected by the words before him. He began rattling off the words at breakneck speed, as if he were double-parked -- and, in the process, sucked the life from this most powerful of scriptural readings.
I left feeling sad, disappointed and more than a little miffed. What was this guy’s problem? If I’d been reading that part, I told myself, I’d have taken my time and let the power of the reading come through in my voice, in my whole being.

The problem was, I wasn’t a lector. More than that, I wasn’t comfortable speaking in front of more than three or four people at a time, unless you consider hands shaking, knees knocking, palms sweating and voice quavering "comfortable."

A moment of truth? Yes. Time to put up or shut up? Yes.

Helped by prayer -- and the realization that God never puts us in situations we can’t handle, provided we have faith that Jesus is right there beside us -- I resolved to become a lector, to overcome my fear of public speaking (or, at least, to hide it better), and to do my best to proclaim the good news to God’s people.

Over the course of many months, that’s exactly what I did.

After some initial stage fright, I have learned to control my nerves, to channel my anxieties more constructively, to allow myself to be used as God’s vehicle in proclaiming his good news. I’m far from perfect, but I have proclaimed Scripture to a few dozen people, a few hundred people, even a few thousand people, without fear, worry or shaking but with energy, passion and excitement that comes from believing the word of God.

And it all grew from that retreat, and the words of a young woman. To me, her words were not simply a wake-up call. They were the words, and the work, of mercy, for they addressed a need - - my need to serve others, to do what the works of mercy call on us to do as disciples of our Lord Jesus.

(Nelson is former editor of The Tidings, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.)

Works of mercy highlight the teachings of Jesus
By Daniel S. Mulhall
Catholic News Service

The corporal and spiritual works of mercy are all found in the Gospels, especially in Matthew’s Gospel, and primarily in two passages: Matthew 5-7 and Matthew 25:31-46.

Matthew 5-7 contains the primary teaching of Jesus, including the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 25 focuses on the rewards for being a disciple: "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25:40).

Scripture scholars consider these passages in Matthew "bookends" that establish the boundaries of Jesus' teaching, from the beginning of his teaching until just before his passion. Matthew 5-7 lays out the foundations of Jesus’ teaching and Matthew 25 brings it to a close.

Everything in between can best be understood by these two sections of the teaching. They serve as a primer for what a follower of Jesus will do and how that follower will live.

The corporal and spiritual works of mercy serve as a shorthand synthesis of Jesus’ teaching. If you want to follow Jesus, then you have to practice these works of mercy: care for those in need, physically, emotionally, socially, psychologically or spiritually.

Chapters 5-7 in Matthew establish the attitudes Christians need to exhibit toward others. We are to be poor in spirit, meek, on fire for justice, yet merciful. We are to be lights in the darkness and seasoning in the blandness of life.

A disciple keeps the law and teaches others to do the same. A disciple treats others with kindness and dignity and forgives freely. A disciple is to be generous and helpful.

In these chapters Jesus also teaches his disciples to pray and give alms, and to do it with the proper motives "Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father" (Mt 6:1).

In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus tells of a time of judgment "when the Son of Man comes in his glory," and those who are blessed are those who have fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger,
clothed the naked and visited those who were ill or in prison. These are all actions that care for the physical well-being of the person.

Those who fail this test of discipleship are dismissed to "eternal punishment."

The teaching that Jesus gave to his disciples still resonates with us today. The corporal and spiritual works of mercy tell us that we have an obligation to care for others because they are God's creatures and in need of our help.

When we provide shelter for one who has none or comfort the afflicted, we show our love for God. When we counsel those in doubt or free those who are held captive, we bring light and hope where little previously existed. When we do each of these things for those in need, we do them for Jesus.

Each of the works of mercy is important, and all are needed. As Matthew's Gospel makes clear, Christians are called to care for the entire person, mind and heart, body and soul.

(Mulhall is a freelance writer and a catechist for adults. He lives in Laurel, Maryland.)

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

In a Sept. 10, 2014, general audience, Pope Francis spoke of how the church "teaches us works of mercy." The church, he said, "conducts herself like Jesus" and does not "teach theoretical lessons on love, on mercy."

The lessons he speaks of come right out of the works of mercy.

"Mother Church teaches us to give food and drink to those who are hungry and thirsty, to clothe those who are naked. ... Mother Church teaches us to be close to those who are sick. ... Mother Church teaches us to be close to those who are in prison."

After he finished enumerating the works of mercy, he said that "mercy overcomes every wall, every barrier, and leads you to always seek the face of the man, of the person. And it is mercy that changes the heart and the life."

By teaching the works of mercy, he said, the church teaches "what's essential for salvation": "To change the world for the better it is necessary to do good to those who are not able to return the favor."