

LENT

A SEA OF GOD'S MERCY

I was praying and it came to me that Lent is a sort of sea of God's mercy. In my imagination Lent was warm and quiet and inviting for us to swim in. If we did swim in it, we would be not only refreshed but cleansed, for God's mercy cleanses as nothing else does.

Then I thought of our reticence. I don't know if it is reticence or fear to really plunge into God's mercy. We really want to be washed clean; we want to be forgiven. But these desires meet with something else inside. I say to myself that if I do enter into the sea of mercy I will be healed, and then I will be bound to practice what Christ preaches, his law of love, which is painful, so terribly painful. There by that sea I stand and think: If I seek mercy I have to dish out mercy; I have to be merciful to others.

What does it mean to be merciful to others? It means to open my own heart, like a little sea, for people to swim in.

If we stand before God's mercy and drink of it, it will mean that the Our Father is a reality, and not just a prayer that I say. "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come...." We like that part and have no problem saying it.

But then we come to: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.... Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We shake our heads and

say, "Yes, it's Lent; it's true we should be forgiving everybody." But we don't like trespassers. If strangers come to use our beaches we will say to ourselves: What are they doing here? Why do they come to our beach? It's not easy to make of one's heart a little sea of mercy for the other.

We should also be listening to God's will. But we think: Wait a second! "Thy will." What does that mean?

It means many things. For instance somebody is thinking of entering a convent and they say, "Well, I don't know; I'm afraid. Maybe I won't measure up." Silly people! Of course they won't measure up, but God will measure up for them. If he calls them, he'll give them the grace. As we look at

the will of God—to go to a convent or to marry or to just live in the world in the conditions of today, to submit oneself to somebody else—our hackles rise up against authority. To submit to the will of God would be to put our toe in the sea of God's mercy.

Lent relentlessly moves on and shows us who we are, our true identity as Christians, what it means to be Christian.

The mercy that we must give to others includes that of standing up for the poor, the lonely, those who have no education and cannot stand up for themselves. It means to engage in what we call social justice on behalf of our sister and brother. That involves opening our-



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selves to being pushed around and crucified. This always happens to those who stand up for others. Do we want to go into the sea of God's mercy, to be washed clean so that we begin to do the things of Christ?

What is this Lent all about? It is to go into some strange and incredible depths of ourself and there to meet the sea of God's mercy and swim in it, having shed all garments, garments of selfishness and fear.

Take for instance the fear of ridicule. Christ said to St. Francis, "I want you to be the greatest fool that anyone ever saw." Did you ever stop to think what an absolute foolishness Christ is? It borders on idiocy, not mental idiocy, but a sort of passionate foolishness. Just think of a human being letting himself be crucified for someone else—in this case for the world. How high can the foolishness of love go? How deep, how wide? That's the foolishness he wants us to assume.

There was a little Franciscan brother, Juniper, who used to play see-saw with children; people thought it funny for a man to do that. He did it specifically so that people would ridicule him. Lots of saints went about being ridiculed. The Russian *urodivoi*—fools for Christ—loved to open themselves to ridicule. They wanted to play the fool to atone for those who call Christ a fool.

Those are extremes of people falling in love with God so totally that they desire ridicule. But what about us? Are we going to allow Lent to give us the Holy Spirit's immense gift of fortitude? It is a gift that is little spoken of and is neglected. Fortitude is courage, the courage of our convictions. Christ said, "Who is not with me is against me."

Lent is here to remind us that the mercy of God is ours, provided we embrace his law of love; provided we realize that it's going to hurt, and hurt plenty, but that the very hurting will be a healing. That is the paradox of God, that while you hurt, you heal. That's true healing.

The sea of his mercy is open before us. Lent definitely and inexorably leads us to it and makes us think about what it takes to swim in it. Lent also reminds us that each of our hearts can be a sea of mercy and forgiveness to others. This is a very great shortcut to God's heart.

From *Season of Mercy: Lent and Easter*, with Catherine Doherty, pp. 39-41