

# "Mercy within Mercy within Mercy"

## Presidential Address – ITMS Seventh General Meeting

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By Christine M. Bochen

We come together in Louisville in 2001 to learn from each other, to reflect and pray together, and to celebrate! This evening is for celebration – a time to share a wonderful meal; to renew friendships and begin to forge new bonds; and to enjoy company, conversation, and music. It is also an evening to celebrate the spirit of the man who brings us together, an evening during which it has become a tradition for the president to deliver a Presidential Address. I have always enjoyed this part of the program and remember, with appreciation and gratitude, hearing my predecessors: William Shannon, Robert Daggy, Bonnie Thurston, James Conner, Patrick O'Connell and Tom Del Prete. And I am sure that I will especially enjoy the Presidential Address in Vancouver in 2003.

As I reflected on the theme of this meeting, "Shining Like the Sun: Merton's Transforming Vision," it struck me that Merton's experience at Fourth and Walnut was a moment – an important moment to be sure – but only a moment in Merton's life, rooted in what had gone before and full of promise of what was still to be, in a life of fidelity, commitment and extraordinary witness. What happened at that crowded corner of downtown Louisville was actually one of many epiphanies in Merton's life. I am thinking – not only of the "epiphanies" well-known to readers of Merton such as the night in Rome when he sensed his own desolation and experienced his dead father's presence, or the day he heard Cuban children shouting out "Credo" at Mass in a Havana church in 1940, or the sudden clarity of vision he experienced in the presence of the reclining Buddha at Polonnaruwa in 1968 – but also the countless other epiphanies that Merton experienced during his life as manifestations of God's mercy. Mercy was a thread woven into the very fabric of Merton's life and theological vision. Mercy was integral to Merton's experience of himself, of God, and of others. And so it should be for us. Mercy has relevance for all peoples in all times and special relevance, it seems, for those of us living in these times, when each of us needs to hear words of mercy and when we need to bless each other with acts of mercy.

Although mercy is a word that actually occurs with some frequency in Merton's writings, the reality of mercy informs all his writings – on spirituality and on social issues – as it did his life. On several occasions, Merton wrote about mercy at some length. There are notes on mercy in a chapter of *No Man Is an Island*, published in 1955;<sup>1</sup> in 1961, he wrote a homily on the parable of the Good Samaritan, which



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was later published in *Seasons of Celebration*;<sup>2</sup> and, in April 1964, Thomas Merton wrote an essay on mercy for a commemorative volume honoring Albert Schweitzer; the volume was entitled *The Gospel of Mercy: Dr. Schweitzer*<sup>3</sup> and Merton titled his essay, “The Climate of Mercy.”<sup>4</sup> In these essays, Merton offers three insights that are especially central to his understanding of mercy – three insights expressed in three words: epiphany, transformation, and climate.

#### Epiphanies of Mercy

Christians, who celebrate annually the Feast of the Epiphany, commemorating the manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles, know that an epiphany is a manifestation of the divine in our midst. Epiphany is revelation. Mercy, Merton writes in the opening paragraph of “The Climate of Mercy,” is the “epiphany of hidden truth and of God’s redeeming Love.” Mercy is a “revelation of God,” a revelation of God’s very Self – “as Love, as Creator and Father, as Son and Savior, as Life-giving Spirit.” Mercy is not an intellectual deduction; it is a happening: “an event in which God reveals himself to us in His redemptive love and in the great gift which is the outcome of this event: our mercy to others” (*L&L* 203). And in that event we learn what God is like. The “center of all mercy” is “the saving mystery of the Cross, which alone enables us to enter into a true spiritual harmony with one another, seeing one another not only in natural fellowship but in the Spirit and mercy of Christ, who emptied Himself for us and became obedient even to death (Philippians 2:2-8)” (*L&L* 203). For the Christian, the Cross is epiphany!

Building on Merton’s own image of mercy as epiphany, I would like to suggest that Merton experienced epiphanies of mercy throughout his life and that, in the course of these experiences he learned, firsthand, the reality and meaning of mercy. He was able to write, in such a compelling way, about mercy for the same reason he was able to write as he did about contemplation: he was writing about what he had experienced. Let me share with you Merton’s accounts of three epiphanies of mercy.

“The Voice of God is heard in Paradise,” Merton writes at the end of the “Fire Watch, July 4, 1952.” In the course of the prose poem, published in the final pages of *The Sign of Jonas*, Merton addresses God. Now he hears God speaking to him – about mercy. “*What was cruel has become merciful. What is now merciful was never cruel. I have always overshadowed Jonas with My mercy, and cruelty I know not at all. Have you had sight of Me, Jonas My child? Mercy within mercy within mercy.*”<sup>5</sup> God is “mercy within mercy within mercy.”

In a journal entry written in December 1964, Merton recorded another epiphany of mercy: “And this morning, coming down, seeing the multitude of stars above the bare branches of the wood, I was suddenly hit, as it were, with the whole package of meaning of everything: that the immense mercy of God was upon me, that the Lord in infinite kindness had looked down on me and given me this vocation out of love, and that he had always intended this, and how foolish and trivial had been all my fears and twistings and desperation” (*DWL* 177-78). The “meaning of everything” is disclosed in an experience of God’s mercy.

And, in a moving passage in *Day of a Stranger*, a prose poem in which Merton describes a typical day in his life at the hermitage, he writes:

I am out of bed at two-fifteen in the morning, when the night is darkest and most silent. . . . I find myself in the primordial lostness of night, solitude, forest, peace, a mind awake in the dark, looking for a light, not totally reconciled to being out of bed. A light appears, and in the light an ikon. There is now in the large darkness a small room of radiance with psalms in it. The psalms grow up silently by them-

selves without effort like plants in this light which is favorable to them. The plants hold themselves up on stems that have a single consistency, that of mercy, or rather great mercy. *Magna misericordia*. In the formlessness of night and silence a word then pronounces itself: Mercy.<sup>6</sup>

These epiphanies of mercy, selected from among passages in which Merton explicitly speaks of God's mercy, point to the undercurrent of mercy that flowed deeply in Merton's life – revealing both God and his own true self.

Mercy reveals what God is like. Reflecting on the parable of the Good Samaritan, Merton recognizes that the parable is “a revelation of God in a word that has great importance through all the Scriptures from the beginning to the end. It is a revelation of what the prophet Hosea says, speaking for the invisible God: ‘I will have *mercy* and not sacrifices’” (Hosea 6:6) (*SC* 175). Merton asks, “What is this *mercy* which we find spoken of everywhere in the Scriptures, and especially in the Psalms?” (*SC* 175). In the Hebrew scriptures, the key word for mercy is *hesed* (or *chesed* in Merton's usage). *Chesed* names the loving mercy and unwavering fidelity that are “most characteristic” of the God who enters into a Covenant with Israel. *Chesed*, Merton tells us, “binds us to God because He has promised us mercy and will never fail in His promise. For He cannot fail. It is the power and the mercy which are most characteristic of Him, which come nearer to the mystery into which we enter when all concepts darken and evade us” (*SC* 175). But *chesed* is “more than mercy,” Merton explains, in the course of his reflection on the parable of the Good Samaritan, for “it contains in itself many varied aspects of God's love which flash forth in mercy and are its fountain and its hidden source” (*SC* 177). Merton reminds us that the Hebrew scriptures are replete with images of the God of mercy. In Exodus, we read of God who is “merciful and gracious, patient and of much compassion and true, who keepeth mercy unto thousands” (Ex. 34: 6-7). The prophet Isaiah speaks of Israel “as a woman forsaken and mourning in spirit, and as a wife cast off from her youth. . . . For a small moment have I forsaken thee, but with great mercies will I gather thee. In a moment of indignation have I hid my face a little from thee, but with everlasting kindness have I had mercy on thee” (Is. 54: 6-8). The image of a God who cannot forsake the people and gathers them with kindness and mercy, is one of many images of God which speak so eloquently of mercy. These feminine images of God, found in scripture, have often gone unnoticed. But Merton took notice.

The mercy of God is both free and freeing. God's mercy is “a gratuitous mercy that considers no fitness, no worthiness and no return” (*SC* 178). Quoting the words of a fourteenth-century English mystic who wrote: “He abideth patiently, he forgiveth easily, he understandeth mercifully, he forgetteth utterly” (*L&L* 205), Merton explains that God “*understands mercifully*,” seeing us as we are and penetrating our whole being “with mercy from within so that the inmost reality of the sinner is no longer sinfulness but sonship” (*L&L* 205).

The *chesed* of God is revealed in God's very being as the God who enters into covenant with Israel, who saves us in Jesus Christ and who is the life-giving Spirit. Merton puts it this way:

The *chesed* of God is truth. It is infallible strength. It is the love by which He seeks and chooses His chosen, and binds them to Himself. It is the love by which He is married to mankind, so that if humanity is faithless to Him it must still always have a fidelity to which to return: that is His own fidelity. He has become inseparable from man in the *chesed* which we call “Incarnation,” and “Cross,” and “Resurrection.” He has also given us His *chesed* in the Person of His Spirit. The Paraclete is the full, inexpressible mystery of *chesed*. So that in the depths of our

own being there is an inexhaustible spring of mercy and of love. Our own being has become love. Our own self has become God's love for us, and it is full of Christ, of *chesed*. But we must face it and accept it. . . . We must be to ourselves and to others signs and sacraments of mercy (SC 178-79).

#### The Transforming Power of Mercy

"[M]ercy is the thing, the deepest thing that has been revealed to us by God. A mercy that cannot fail," Merton told a group of priests in Alaska in 1968.<sup>7</sup> Mercy is at the center of Christian experience, "a center from which we can understand everything else" and, led to the center by prayer, "you will experience the love and mercy of God for yourself and find your true identity as a person to whom God has been merciful and continues to be merciful" (TMA 160). We discover who we are when we discover ourselves "as one loved by God, as chosen by God, and visited and overshadowed by God's mercy" (TMA 160-61).

Simply put, God's mercy transforms us – enabling us to overcome our alienation, to see ourselves as we are, to recognize ourselves as "having an inner being in which truth is present" (L&L 205). God's mercy frees us to be who we truly are: "the self-seeking self is liberated . . . by *finding* not self but truth in Christ. This 'finding' is the discovery, in grace and faith, that one is 'mercifully understood' and that in the Spirit of this mercy and this understanding one is enabled to understand others in mercy and in pity" (L&L 207).

We are called both to receive mercy and to give it. To receive mercy we must recognize our need for mercy and allow ourselves to be transformed by God's mercy. In a journal entry written in the early fifties, Merton offers the example of Mary of Magdala whose sins were forgiven her "because she has loved much" (Luke 7:47) and Simon and the Pharisees who did not "understand love" and could not "receive the teachings of Jesus about forgiveness." They are scandalized when Jesus forgives Mary's sins. "It does not even occur to them that they themselves need forgiveness, and since they do not feel any need of mercy, the question of forgiveness and love is a purely abstract one, a canonical question, a matter of jurisdiction."<sup>8</sup> But Mary, who admits her neediness and risks loving, experiences the transforming power of mercy.

"The whole climate of the New Testament is one of liberation by mercy," Merton explains. "The climate of the Gospel is, then, a climate at once of mercy and of life, of forgiveness and creativity. We enter into this climate and breathe its pure air by faith, which is submission to the 'New Law' of grace and forgiveness, that is to say, submission to a Law of accepting and being accepted, loving and being loved, in a personal encounter with the Lord of Life and with our brother in him" (L&L 210). I am reminded of twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich's imperative to simply accept the fact that you are accepted. How difficult it is for us to do that. And how necessary it is that we do.

In Merton's words, we are called to become *chasids* – saints – and to be sacraments in whom the mercy and power of God are visibly manifest. Through the saint, God's love and mercy "reach the world." But, Merton reminds us, "the sinner is 'next to' the *chasid* or the saint. They are so close to one another, so like one another, that they are sometimes almost indistinguishable" (SC 179). This is an important aspect of God's mercy. We are all in need of it – sinner and saint alike. Mercy reaches out to us in our common humanity – in which "We are already one."<sup>9</sup>

#### A Climate of Mercy

Having received mercy, we must show mercy to others and so advance the work of transformation ourselves. "To receive mercy and to give it is, then, to participate" as children of the Father, "in the work of the new creation and of redemption" (L&L 204). The work of mercy is participation in

the liberative work God has begun in us and in our world through Jesus Christ. We are called to realize the Gospel “climate of mercy” in our world.

Mercy is a climate – an atmosphere or environment – in which the *chesed* of God is accepted and shared, a climate in which mercy is at once work and principle. Liberation theologian Jon Sobrino, explaining the “principle of mercy,” recognizes that mercy is “not only a fundamental attitude at the root of every human interaction but also a principle that affects subsequent interactions.”<sup>10</sup> The climate of mercy demands compassionate response to the immediacy of suffering before us but it also requires that mercy become the principle that informs our actions as a society and as a church. The principle of mercy requires that we alleviate suffering as well as identify and address the roots of that suffering. The climate of mercy is one in which the physical and spiritual needs of the neighbor are met.

The Christian tradition has named the ways of meeting these needs as the corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to visit the imprisoned, to shelter the homeless, to visit the sick, to bury the dead. We are accustomed to interpreting these corporal works of mercy in an individual sense. To create a “climate of mercy” we need to ask ourselves how these works of mercy might also inform public policy and public life – nationally and globally. How do we ensure that all people have access to unpolluted water? How do we clothe those stripped of dignity and power? How do we care for the homeless, the sick, the dying and the dead in a world that – despite the rhetoric of compassion – is sorely lacking in mercy? How do we practice acts of mercy in a world committed to acts of war?

The Christian tradition also names spiritual works of mercy: to admonish the sinner, to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to comfort the sorrowful, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive all injuries, to pray for the living and the dead. How are we to practice these works of mercy – creatively and effectively – in today’s world? Who is in need of our words of truth, our teaching, our comfort, and our prayer? What do the ignorant, the doubtful, and the sorrowful need from us? One thing is certain: the acts of mercy – corporal and spiritual – invite us to look beyond ourselves in compassion and to work together to foster a climate of mercy. Mercy must become our natural climate.

A climate of mercy is not a “the climate of totalism”; it is a climate of freedom. Totalism produces a “climate of security purchased by servile resignation under human power: obedience to the authority of might rather than freedom in the climate of life-giving love and mercy” (*L&L* 211-12). Mercy nurtures freedom and honors persons: authority and power are not ends in themselves to which persons become subservient.

The climate of mercy is the climate of the new creation, which depends on the realization that all “*are acceptable before God*, since the Word was made man, dwelt among us, died on the Cross for us, rose from the dead, and is enthroned in our flesh, our humanity, in the glory of God. Hence, all that is required for a man to be acceptable before God, and a recipient of mercy, is for him to be a man and a sinner. (I did not come to call the just but sinners . . . Matthew 9:13; Romans 5:8)” (*L&L* 212). All that is required is that the other need our mercy. “It is not required that he be a certain type of man, belonging to a special race, or class” or religion. It is not required that she be like ourselves. The climate of mercy cannot flourish when some set themselves over others claiming superiority and power over them. We have seen such abuse of power “at work in colonialism and in racism, where the arrogance of unscrupulous and self-righteous power has deeply wounded the consciousness of millions. . . . From these deep wounds will spring new ‘laws ‘ of violence, hatred, and revenge” (*L&L* 213). We need not look to the past to see evidence of this climate of totalism – which breeds a

climate of death and condemnation and perpetuates a cycle of violence. It is all around us.

A climate of mercy, Merton reminds us, is a climate of life, not a climate of death and condemnation:

Mercy heals in every way. It heals bodies, spirits, society, and history. It is the only force that can truly heal and save. . . . Mercy heals the root of life by curing our existence of the self-devouring despair which projects its own evil upon the other as a demand and an accusation.

When we are enabled by God's gift to become merciful, we are given the power to understand mercifully, to accept and to pardon the evil in others, not as a fruit of some godlike magnanimity rooted in our own justice, but first of all as the fruit of a self-knowledge which is liberated from the need to project its own evil upon the other (*L&L* 216-17).

### Called by Mercy

Merton challenges each of us to confront simple yet difficult questions: what kind of person do I want to be? What kind of people do we want to be? What would happen if we, like Merton, began to confront the urgent issues of our day, with eyes open to the reality of God that is within each one of us? What would happen if we, like Merton, looked critically at our actions – as individuals and as communities and as nations and asked what our actions say about what kind of a people we are? Merton reminds us that eyes, opened by faith, and a spirit, enlivened by prayer, see things in a different light.

When Merton began to speak out against war, against racism, against violence – he disturbed people of faith who preferred that he devote himself to writing about contemplation and prayer. He even disturbed the superiors who silenced him. The man of prayer become a prophet had gone too far. But we need both the person of prayer and the prophet to open our eyes and stir our consciences. It is the prayerful and the prophetic Merton who calls us to accept mercy and share it and to make mercy our natural climate.

“Mercy within mercy within mercy!” At the center is God's mercy – enfolding us in God's embrace and inviting us to embrace one another in mercy and love!

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) 206-16.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965) 171-82; subsequent references will be cited as “SC” parenthetically in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Merton, “*Le climat de miséricorde*,” translated into French by Marc and Christiane Schweyer, in *L'Évangile de la Miséricorde: Hommage au Dr. Schweitzer* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1965) 311-29.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Merton, “The Climate of Mercy,” *The Cord* 15 (April 1965) 89-96, reprinted in *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 203-19; subsequent references will be cited as “*L&L*” parenthetically in the text. Merton finished the essay on April 3, 1964, as he notes in his journal: see Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 94; subsequent references will be cited as “*DWL*” parenthetically in the text. Merton sent the article to Leslie Dewart: see letter to Dewart, dated April 24, 1964, in Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, ed. William H. Shannon (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 296.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 362.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981) 43.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals and Letters*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989) 160; subsequent references will be cited as “*TMA*” parenthetically in the text.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, ed. Lawrence Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 17.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart, James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 308.

<sup>10</sup> Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992) 10.