

Mercy within Mercy

By Michael Plekon

In the past few years, just serendipitously, I have come upon the many times Thomas Merton talks about God's mercy – never abstractly, always with very specific reference to Merton's own experience, his own life, hopes, disappointments, sufferings but also joy. The "Fire Watch" conclusion to *The Sign of Jonas*, possibly one of Merton's most beautiful passages, is doubtless the most powerful.

What was vile has become precious. What is now precious was never vile. I have always known the vile as precious: for what is vile I know not at all. 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. I have forgiven the universe without end, because I have never known sin.¹

I was asked to preach at the celebration of the 75th anniversary of Merton's baptism, then to give another talk, both of these at his upper West Side parish in Columbia days, Corpus Christi. The upper West Side is dear to me, where we lived the first years of our marriage, decades ago. I have been reading Merton since I was 12 or 13 and that is over a half century ago. His writing led me into religious life, and I think later on, into academic life and priestly service. You know that line about how much better Shakespeare sounds, how he seems to improve, the older you get? You could substitute Bach or e. e. cummings, Augustine or Dorothy Day and it would be true. It is also true for Merton with me. Now later in life, with much floating into my consciousness daily from teaching and the lives of my adult children, the entries in Merton's journals about longing and about hope, and especially about how everything depends on the mercy of God – how powerful these are for me.

But hardly for me only. What a wonderful wave of hope has washed over us all since Pope Francis began to remind us, over and over again, of God's mercy and the need for our mercy as well. When so many younger people see no point in the institutional church, in politics, in the rigged economy, in their future, this song of mercy is one they are able to hear and hum back. For Thomas Merton, it was never just a theoretical issue or abstract concept, mercy. It was the hard realization of his many mistakes, his imperfections and humanity that made mercy the theme constantly running through his writing, constantly experienced in his life. For all the other things Merton taught us – the need to be silent before God, to search for our true self, to recognize our solidarity with those oppressed, to oppose the endless "solution" of war – there, at the heart of all these challenges was the great joy and encouragement of God's mercy for us always.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 362.

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