A God of Mercy, A People of Mercy:  
*The Year of Mercy and the Mission of the Church*
The quality of mercy is not strained
It droppeth as gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath; it is twice blest;
It blesses him that gives
And him that takes:
‘Tis mightiest in the mighty;
It becomes the throned monarch
Better than his crown

His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthronèd in the heart of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God’s
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore ...
... consider this,
That, in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation; we do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer should teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.
Portia’s famous speech

- Probably quoted a lot in this year of mercy
- Startled me when I re-read it
- Actually found here the outline for what I want to share about Mission and Mercy
- Mercy is an attribute of God as such
- People are most like God when they “season” justice with mercy; “render deeds of mercy”
My Reflections—Two Parts

• First part—reflect on the Triune God, a communion-in-mission, as a God of mercy

• Second part—how we as church are called to be a People of Mercy, a “community of missionary, mercy-bearing disciples,”
A GOD OF MERCY:
Communion-in-Mission
Shakespeare: “an attribute to God himself”

- Cardinal Walter Kasper—needs to be understood even more fundamentally
- “God’s Defining Attribute”
- Cannot be regarded as marginal, derivative quality
- “Instead, mercy is ... the essence of God, who is love (1Jn 4:8, 16).”
Mercy is at the very heart of God

- “not strained”!
- Why “God never tires of forgiving us”
- Because of God’s overflowing heart—more than forgiving
- Delights in creating, wants to relieve pain in suffering, always forgiving
- Deepest motive for God’s mission
Mercy from the Beginning/
Mercy in Israel
During an Angelus message...

Pope Francis told of an old woman he met in Buenos Aires.
Told him “without mercy the world would not exist.”
Francis: “Do you teach at the Gregorian in Rome?”

Creation—God’s first act of mercy, first act of mission.

Expression of God’s overflowing heart of mercy.

Bonaventure: “diffusive of itself”
Dennis Edwards describes act of creation as the gentle, caring, loving action of the Holy Spirit… coaxing and persuading the formation of the gases and molecules, stars, and planets...

Emerging life on earth, microbes, corals, barramundi, kangaroos, and human beings...
Elizabeth Johnson

- Writes of how the Spirit’s presence is active all through the creation process
- But not the presence of a determining monarch
- But freeing, life-giving presence of a lover
- Creation conceived in and executed in mercy
- Pickard: universe sustained by a continual and infinitely patient act of love.
- ‘mightiest in the mighty’
- Aquinas: mercy manifests God’s omnipotence to the greatest degree
In the history of a relatively insignificant people, however...

- God revealed Godself fully as a God of mercy
- In Abraham, all nations would find a blessing
- In and through Israel God would show mercy
- When Israel was oppressed by the Egyptians, God saw, heard, came down to deliver them
As God gives the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai

- As God’s great proof for Israel of God’s mercy and love
- Passes by Moses and cries out
- ‘The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation’
Hosea 11—‘says everything’

- Three parts
- First—God reminisces about God’s love for Israel
  - ‘When Israel was a child I loved him’ (1)
  - ‘It was I who taught Ephraim to walk’ (3)
  - ‘I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks’
- Sam Wells: ‘You can feel God stroking Israel’s soft skin... What a tender scene!’
But then, scene shifts—God laments Israel’s unfaithfulness

‘The more I called them, the more they went from me ... My people are bent on turning away from me’
Third—’the most poignant one of all’—given a window into the heart of God

‘an all-night struggle between sober, realistic pragmatism; passionate wild fury, and overwhelming, tender compassion’— MERCY!
‘HOW CAN I GIVE YOU UP, EPHRAIM? HOW CAN I HAND YOU OVER, ISRAEL?
... MY HEART RECOILS WITHIN ME; MY COMPASSION [MERCY!]
GROWS WARM AND TENDER’ (8)
God cannot save Israel from the consequences of its unfaithfulness...

• Pope Francis quoting Augustine:

• ‘It is easier for God to hold back anger than mercy’
One small verse in Ps 49...

- Might explain how ‘God’s love is crazy, illogical, and a matter of pure grace’
‘God delights in God’s People’ (4)

Simply something about this people that moved God’s heart! As OT goes on, we see that this applies to ALL peoples!
Rev. John Ames in *Gilead*

Ames muses: 'I do like Calvin’s image…it suggests how God might actually enjoy us. I believe we think of that far too little.'

‘not in any simple sense, of course, but as you enjoy the being of a child, even though he is a thorn in your heart’

“Can a mother forget the infant at her breast, walk away from the baby she bore? But even if mothers forget, I’d never forget you—never. Isaiah 49:15
INCARNATE MERCY
“In the fullness of time” (Gal 4:4)

- The mercy lavished upon all creation but on Israel specifically
- Takes on a human face in the person of Jesus of Nazareth
- He is incarnate mercy
- ‘the face of mercy’
- Mark Oakley: ‘God’s body language’
We see God’s mercy in Jesus’ exorcisms and healings

- We see it in Jesus’ healing of Blind Bartimaeus (Mk 10:46-52)
- Who cries out ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’
- And Jesus did.
- And Bartimaeus received his sight
We see mercy in Jesus’ healing of a leper

- Mark’s version (1:40-45)—Jesus heard the leper’s plea
- Was ‘moved to pity’—mercy!
- Reached out and touched him
- Not a hesitant or fearful touch
- Loving, generous, merciful touch, embrace
- And the leper was healed
Every once in a while...

Not—OH NO!!

Incarnate mercy! The Face of Mercy! God’s Body Language!

...we see mercy incarnate in Jesus’ attitudes and actions
Mark 6
Many of Jesus’ parables—incarnations in words of God’s mercy

In these parables—determination of God in parables of shepherd and woman; God’s patience in parable of the Loving Father

And God’s joy when that determination succeeds and that patience pays off

Truth of Pope Francis—God never tires of forgiving us!
Marvelous parallel

Wendell Berry’s poem:

“To My Mother”

I was your rebellious son
Do you remember?
I wonder if you do remember,
So complete has your forgiveness been.

So complete has your forgiveness been
I wonder sometimes if it did not
Precede my wrong, and I erred,
Safe found, within your love,
Prepared ahead of me, the way home
Or my bed at night, so that almost
I should forgive you, who perhaps
Foresaw the worst that I might do,

And forgave before I could act,
Causing me to smile now, looking back
To see how paltry was my worst,
Compared to your forgiveness of it

Already given ...
God’s mercy perhaps most fully and graphically revealed, though

- In Jesus’ death on the cross
- As Paul says powerfully
- Hard enough to die for a good person
- Jesus reveals the merciful heart of God—‘While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us’ (Rom 5:8)
Denise Levertov

To live in the mercy of God

To feel vibrate the enraptured waterfall flinging itself unabating down and down to clenched fists of rock.
Swiftness of plunge,
Hour after year after century

... Thus, not mild, not temperate
God’s love for the world. Vast
flood of mercy
flung on resistance
If it were, as NT Wright argues, we would not be able to explain how Jesus and his story continue to live on today.

As it is, the mercy of God, incarnate in Jesus, has been shared with Jesus’ disciples—those called to be his church.

As we all know, Jesus death is not the end of the story.
A PEOPLE OF MERCY:
A Community of Missionary, Mercy-Bearing Disciples
The Great Mercy of God

Does not stop with simply having mercy on us—
- Giving the gift of existence and life
- Working for our healing and liberation
- Restoring us to relationship after sin
God’s mercy takes us into God’s very life—
*God’s very Mission*

Paul—in virtue of Baptism
Christians put on Christ (Gal 3:27)
Have the mind of Christ (1Cor 2:16)
Conformed to Christ (Rom 8:29, 2Cor 3:18)
Are Christ’s body in the world (Rom 12:3-8)
What I’d like to suggest, therefore:

- Because God is a God of mercy
- We are People of Mercy
- God is that intemperate waterfall, “not strained,” “river of mercy”
- We who are baptized share the divine life
- Called to be witnesses to, sacraments of God’s mercy, to embody mercy
How might we embody mercy today?

- Basic way: church needs to embody God’s mercy
- Needs to realize that IT needs mercy
- Needs to be an ‘oasis of mercy’
- ‘a mother with an open heart’
- ‘house of the father with doors always wide open’
- ‘house of the father of the prodigal son’
Part of this ‘open door policy’

Interview:

‘the ministers of the church must be ministers of mercy above all.’
“Mercy-ing”
Pope Francis’s Motto:

- From homily by Venerable Bede:
- “Having mercy, he chose him”
- As pope prefers: “MERCYING, he chose him”
- Makes mercy into a verb
- Doing works of mercy
- Corporal and Spiritual works of mercy
Corporal Works of Mercy

Roots in Old Testament: Is 58:7-9 and Micah 6:8

Hungry... Thirsty... A stranger... Naked... Sick... Prison...

To these six practices:
- Bury the dead
- Today:
  - Care for creation

Christian form draws from Judgement Scene in Matthew 25:31-46
Spiritual Works of Mercy

Instruct the ignorant
Counsel the doubtful
Comfort the sorrowful
Admonish the sinner
Gladly forgive injuries
Bear wrongs patiently
Pray for the living and the dead
Hand in hand with acts of mercy

• The commitment to Justice
• “mercy-ing” does not just relieve suffering and misery
• Goes to the root of problems
• Works for personal, societal, structural change
• Not just justice for victims
• Justice for perpetrators, “seasoned” with mercy
• Prophets—loved the people!
“Mercy-ing” in Today’s World,
Today’s Australia

Many concrete ways ... Focus here on three
Mercy for Migrants and Refugees

• First trip outside the Vatican—Lampedusa
• Many victims ‘dying at sea, in boats which were vehicles of hope and became vehicles of death’
• ‘Has any of us wept because of this situation and others like it? Has any one of us grieved for the death of these brothers and sisters? ... young mothers carrying their babies? ... We are a society that has forgotten how to weep—to experience compassion [mercy]—suffering with others’

‘the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep.’
We see the same kind of indifference

- In many Europeans with Syrian migrants
- With demagogues like Donald Trump who would exclude Muslims and build a wall
- Bishop Long Nguyen: ‘we Australians have rightly felt appalled at the danger that refugees experience on their journeys, but we seem to have come to believe that harshness and rejection will be enough to deter desperate people from their flight to safety.’
As individual Christians, as church

- Need to do all we can to show mercy to these poorest of the poor
- Corporal work of mercy of welcoming the stranger
- Spiritual work of praying for the living and the dead
- Take shape in our voting, contributions, prayer
- How can we be indifferent to Christmas Island, Nauru?
Mercy for Victims and Perpetrators

• Consoling the sorrowful—takes concreteness
• As we open our hearts to the world’s victims
• Women sexually harassed and raped; victims displaced by war, human trafficking, child soldiers, victims of sexual abuse
• Visiting the sick—victims of AIDS, Ebola, Zika
• Food and drink—victims of natural disasters
Much harder, of course, mercy for perpetrators!

Still, no inhuman punishment

Work for “restorative justice”

Practice corporal work of visiting prisoners
Spiritual works of forgiving injuries, bearing wrongs

Doesn’t mean, of course, forgetting the evil done, or absolving them from the consequences of their actions.

Society needs to be protected from criminals, rapists, abusers, drug dealers.
Mercy for Creation

- In EG, Francis speaks of creation as a poor, weak, defenseless being.
- LS—”the earth is becoming a huge pile of filth”
- Need for ‘ecological conversion’
- Philippine Bishops:
- ‘God intended this land for us, God’s special creatures, but not so that we might destroy it and turn it into a wasteland.’
Bishops of Queensland—*Let the Many Coastlands be Glad!*

Great Barrier Reef ‘a special glory’

These are acts of the “new” corporal work of mercy—the care and protection of creation.
In this Jubilee Year, let us allow God to surprise us. He never tires of throwing open the doors of his heart...and wants to share his love with us. ... The Church is called above all to be a credible witness to mercy, professing it and living it as the core of the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

We are called to work with God, to become People of Mercy, Missionary, mercy-bearing disciples.