



# EMBRACE THE YEAR OF MERCY

## Larry and the Year of Mercy

*The following is an actual reflection in light of the Year of Mercy. Names have been removed or changed.*

Larry wanted me to go to lunch with him today.

Larry is a senior citizen that our family brings to Sunday Mass each week. Using his walker, Larry makes his way to the handicapped accessible pew and we sit behind him. Today it was just the two of us at Mass, because my wife was out of town with our two daughters.

I really didn't want to go to lunch. I had my afternoon kind of mapped out and I was afraid this would drag on too long. I thought back to last weekend, when Larry announced after Mass that he wanted to come to our house to watch football. He is blunt like that, and it can be a bit challenging at times. Larry has never married. I have heard him mention a sister, but I get the sense he almost never sees her.

Anyway, we said sure, come on over and watch football and we'll put a pizza in the oven. He stayed late into the afternoon and even enjoyed a cold beer. Two of our sons were home from college for winter break, so we all watched football together.

It was my wife who first opened me up to drawing Larry a bit more into the fabric of our lives. I had gravitated more toward the bring-him-to-Mass-and-then-home-again routine, with the occasional visit to his apartment, because those were "good deeds" that didn't intrude too much into my comfort zone.

My wife, on the other hand, kept coming up with ideas like inviting Larry to Christmas Eve dinner, which we did. She commented once that he has almost nobody in his life, and just maybe connecting with us is for him a bright spot in an otherwise pretty dreary week. I think in the back of my mind I knew that but preferred not to go there. It turns out Christmas Eve dinner was a wonderful time for all of us.

As for the lunch with Larry, I think I ended up enjoying it as much as he did. He had his favorite, the baked chicken special with mashed potatoes. He has some trouble chewing, so it took him a while to eat it, but he had enough left over to box up for supper. Not only that, but, as I was helping Larry put on his coat to leave, the waitress poured him a complimentary cup of coffee to go. That act of kindness brought a smile to his face. Dropping him off fifteen minutes later, I smiled, too. As eccentric and demanding as Larry can sometimes be, we are joined in a common humanity, much more alike than different.

In his 1980 encyclical, *On the Mercy of God*, Pope St. John Paul II wrote, "[M]erciful love is never a unilateral act or process...An act of merciful love is only really such when we are deeply convinced at the moment that we perform it that we are at the same time receiving mercy from the people who are accepting it from us" (n. 14).

This is perhaps a surprising statement, but it only takes a moment's reflection to see its truth. Jesus said, "Whatever you do for one of these least brothers of mine, you do for me" (Mt 25:40). So Jesus tells me he identifies in a particular way with this brother, Larry, who the world so easily casts aside as old and unimportant. Larry, in all his uniqueness, is a gift to me and to our family. In loving him we have the privilege of loving Jesus. What greater mercy, what greater gift, could we receive than that?

In this Year of Mercy, may we encourage one another to discover that gift. We don't have to go to the ends of the earth to find it. The opportunities lie close to home, in our neighborhoods, our parishes and our own families.



DIocese of LA CROSSE, WI