

From Fr. Fleming's Desk

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

If you follow news of Pope Francis then you're probably aware that there are a variety of responses to his papacy, his pastoral outreach and his teaching and preaching. While he's widely acclaimed as accessible, warm, open and inviting there are some who see in these very attributes a threat to the dignity and gravitas of his office. For centuries nearly every word uttered and written by a pope has been carefully scripted, vetted and officially released under Vatican auspices. In contrast, Francis often speaks freely and off the cuff - much to the consternation of his critics although I find his style refreshing. When speaking informally, Francis says things that are open to interpretation- and often the interpreters are media reps who lack a theological and ecclesial background to put these papal quotes in context, resulting curious and questionable headlines and sound bytes.

Certainly one hallmark of Francis' papacy has been his emphasis and stress on the mercy of God and how the Church needs to let that very mercy shape, define, guide and inform its pastoral outreach. Although Francis has changed no doctrines of the faith, he has more than once cautioned that stiff, unyielding moralistic thinking and practice run the risk of denying people the very mercy and compassion God intends for them.

When Francis speaks of mercy as he does, some fear that he's abandoning the tenets of Divine and Church law and leaving people free to do as they please with no moral code to shape and define expectations and behavior. My observation is that Francis is simply calling us to meet people as Jesus met all those he encountered in the gospels: *right where they are*. That means meeting people in their holiness and in their sinfulness, in their joys and in their sorrows, in their wisdom and in their confusion.

Jesus met people, first of all, to bring them word of the Father's love and, as needed, word of the Father's mercy and pardon for their sins. Jesus met others not as a policeman or judge but as the Word of God's love - *and* - in the spirit of that love, Jesus often called those he met to change their ways to open their hearts to the love he came to give. Jesus was clear about his priorities when he said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments." (Matthew 22: 37-40) Jesus did not do away with the law but he put it in its proper place: the law is not the master but rather the law is the servant of love. For Jesus, love *is* the law. There's a hymn that begins, "There's a wideness in God's mercy" and that lyric is a good summary of Francis' ministry and preaching. Perhaps it comes down to this question: Which is wider, God's mercy or the law? The answer is, of course, God's mercy.

I was thinking of all of this during the Veneration of the Cross on Good Friday at our 4:00 children's service and at the 7:30 solemn liturgy. At both times, all present were invited to come forward to venerate a near life-size wooden Cross. Some touched the Cross, others kissed it, some embraced it, some bowed, some genuflected and some stood before it and made the Sign of the Cross. Between the two services I witnessed about 500 people venerate the Cross of Jesus. I know many, perhaps even most of these people and because of my ministry as a pastor I know many of the burdens and secrets, the pain and difficulties, the problems and struggles and the faults and sins that are part of their lives. It's an awesome, humbling, grace-filled experience to see all these men, women and children coming forward to venerate the Cross of Christ's merciful love. Although we didn't sing it on Good Friday, I kept thinking, "there's a wideness in God's mercy..." There's a wideness and a depth in God's mercy far beyond anything you and I can imagine - until we find ourselves in need of that mercy and then we begin to have an inkling of the ocean's of mercy that spill forth for us in the blood of the crucified Jesus.

Although the law presents itself as "one size fits all" garment, I know from my own life and sins that this is not always true and sometimes, even often, we fail and burst the law's seams. When this happens and when, with God's grace, we try to make things right our greatest hope and consolation is that we do indeed have a "one size fits all" Cross and that nothing we can do or fail to do stands outside the height and depth and breadth of Christ's Cross, welcoming each and all to the embrace of its outstretched arms.

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Yes, Jesus meets us right where we are and when he meets us in our faults and failings, in our sins, then we go to meet him at the foot of his Cross. There, God's mercy is ours, turning no one away, seeking always to heal us and to mend our lives that we might know, without a doubt, that we are God's chosen and beloved. There's a wideness in God's mercy and the law of God's love will never fail to reach out and rescue us, to comfort us and to challenge us to change our hearts and our ways.

There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in His justice, which is more than liberty.
There is no place where earth's sorrows are more felt than up in Heaven;
There is no place where earth's failings have such kindly judgment given.

But we make His love too narrow by false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness with a zeal He will not own.
There is plentiful redemption in the blood that has been shed;
There is joy for all the members in the sorrows of the Head.

For the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind;
And the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more simple, we should take Him at His word;
And our lives would be all sunshine in the sweetness of our Lord.

Sincerely,
Fr. Fleming