

Compassion/Mercy

Dear People Whom God Loves,

I was talking with a woman one day about how many women are made to feel like second-class members of our church because they do not have the same opportunities as men to serve in our church. I said there was a hopeful sign that this would be addressed because of the emphasis that Pope Francis has placed on all of us to be merciful people.

She replied that perhaps compassion would be a better word than mercy since mercy usually carries the connotation of helping someone who has done wrong or perhaps has something defective. That would seem to imply that there is something wrong or at least second-rate about being a woman. I am glad that she corrected me. I would hate to give the impression that woman are less than men.

Compassion for myself and for others makes me realize that we all have different talents and are called to use those talents as fully as we can. I need to remember that I am not my talents. Some talents are valued more than others by our culture and I understand that. What I need to be aware of is that even if my talents are deemed more valuable by our society, it does not mean that I am more valuable. We are equally valuable because each one of us is made in the image of God and has a role in following Jesus.

Because we all have different talents, we will all be qualified for different places in our society. That is not discrimination. We must ask ourselves: If someone is refused a place in our society, even though they are qualified, because of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender, etc., wouldn't this be discrimination?

Many women feel discriminated against by our church because of their gender, while other women do not feel there is discrimination. When women feel there is discrimination, it hurts.

Some men feel it too, but not in the same way as women do. Some women remain active in the church but the hurt is still inside. Love of our church and what they receive keeps them present, but often there is not the same joy. Some women cannot stand to be part of our church because they feel that women are not treated as equals. We need to listen.

What has this got to do with compassion? If we are compassionate, we will feel the pain these women suffer. We will want to look deeply into the cause of the pain and see if what's causing the pain is necessary. We have nothing to lose and much to gain. I hope that people in the church that are in a position to make a difference will consider the pain of these women and take it seriously.

I call this compassion instead of mercy. Why? Because women have done nothing wrong, and there is nothing wrong with being a woman. Without women, where would we be as a church? We all share the same image of God.

I wonder if a common way we have pictured God for a long time has terribly distorted our image of God without us even being aware of it. Has a distorted image of God affected the way we look at and treat people and hidden from us the image of God we find in the first letter of John: "God is love." *1 In. Ch. 4 v. 8b*

I am talking about the pictures we have seen that are imprinted in our mind: God is a white, male being sitting on a throne high above the sky. When we picture God as white, would that not incline us to think that white people are more like God than people of color? When we picture God as male, would that not incline us to think that men are more like God than women? What about God pictured as a king on a throne? How do we picture kings? Many kings in history accumulated huge amounts of money from the poor. This money was for themselves and those around them. If that is okay for God, would it not be okay for us? Many kings in history made self-serving laws and enforced those laws with severe punishments, sometimes even by killing the "offenders." If it is okay for God, would it not be okay for us? This severe punishing God, who

needs his pound of flesh, is the total opposite of the merciful, loving God that Jesus told us about.
When our image of God gets so distorted, religion can become a vehicle of hate instead of love.

Smile, God Loves You,

Father Clay

P.S. These final thoughts were inspired by the beginning of chapter 4 of the book
"Abounding in Kindness by Sr. Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ. She is a deeply respected American
Catholic theologian. She is deeply respected by her peers.