

The Geography of God's Mercy

Stories of Compassion and Forgiveness



Patrick Hannon, CSC

acta
PUBLICATIONS

CONTENTS



PROLOGUE ❁ 7

I'll Keep You All for Another Day

ONE ❁ 13

A Dwelling in the Forest: The Silent Work of Mercy

Prelude: The Trees that Transcend Fear • 15

She Didn't Have to Say a Word • 19

The Good Son • 25

God Alone • 31

TWO ❁ 37

The Deep Sea: The Power of Compassion

Prelude: The Watery Part of the World • 39

That's the Deal • 43

All Over but the Cryin' • 49

A Gift for Brendan • 55

THREE ❁ 61

The Desert Journey: The Cost of Mercy

Prelude: Rattlesnake Chili • 63

My Brother's Keeper • 69

Writing Straight with Crooked Lines • 75

Coming Back Home • 81

FOUR ❁ 87

A View from the Mountaintop: Seeing What God Sees

Prelude: The Rooftop of the World • 89

In the Dark • 95

FIVE ❀ 103

The Winding River: Healing Mercy

Prelude: River of Mercy • 105

Why Do I Let Myself Worry? • 109

Fat Baby • 113

Untie Her and Let Her Go Free • 117

SIX ❀ 123

The Wind-Swept Plains: Mercy in Plain View

Prelude: Life in the Vast Lane • 125

Candles in Dark Places • 129

One Hundred and Three Steps • 135

SEVEN ❀ 139

The Long and Lonesome Valley: Alone No More

Prelude: Rubicon • 141

The Tenderloin • 145

The Territory of Mercy • 149

Living Memory • 155

EPILOGUE ❀ 159

A Terrible Beauty

PROLOGUE



I'll Keep You All for Another Day

I love the smell of Cream of Wheat. This bowl of mush has become for me what Kraft never intended it to be: a moment when I brush up against the memory of Monica Jane Lighthouse Hannon, aka Mom, leaning against the grizzled stove at dawn, her one hand holding a wooden spoon as she dutifully stirs the pot of porridge, while the other one dutifully holds, between its fingers, her Kool menthol cigarette half consumed. Her eyes are closed, and her dark-framed glasses are fogged over by the steam and she doesn't even know it. Takes a lickin' and keeps on tickin'. She was one tough lady, my mom.

The day before, Mike, Greg and I, all of us under the age of ten, were engaged in one of our epic battles over God-knows-what and were in the process of destroying our bedroom. At one point Greg pushed me against the wobbly bookcase, thus dispatching the Mason jar that held my tooth-picked potato plant from the top shelf. It crashed to the ground, shattering into shards of glass. We knew there would be hell to pay because we could hear our mother already bounding down the stairs prepared to mete out the justice we knew would be ours. I, of course, instinctively made a bee-line to the closet, believing religiously that its darkness would somehow swallow me up and make me disappear. En route my right foot stepped on one of the shards of glass, sending a shot of pain up my spine and into my brain and back again, an agonizing round trip.

There's my mother sitting next to me on the rumpus room stairs trying to dislodge the three-inch long piece of glass from my foot, pressing gently against the skin while ever-so- gingerly removing the glass splinter. Pressing a tad too hard, a loop of blood shoots out and hits her on the forehead, and she about faints. But my life is in her hands now, and she knows it and recovers. She rings Dad's secretary, who has to come and pick us up because it's Brian's sixteenth birthday and Dad and he have taken the station wagon to the Department of Motor Vehicles so Brian can take his driver's test.

There's my mother holding my hand in the operating room at Eden Hospital as the doctor stitches my wounded sole back together again. "Let's say some Hail Mary's," she says, and we rattle them off like nuns. "You're a brave boy," she whispers to me, her lips to my ear as I stifle my cries, and I almost believe her.

There's my mother running down the steep decline of Arcadian Drive, her fluffy slippers flopping away, chasing my brothers as they push me in the Romley's Market shopping cart later that afternoon, its rickety wheels *begging* for a rock big enough or a hole deep enough to send me and my tender foot catapulting into the thin air.

There's my mother leaning against the stove the next morning, like she is every single morning, stirring the Cream of Wheat, adding a dollop of butter and a generous sprinkling of brown sugar and, on good days, a touch of cinnamon.

And there she is ladling the creamy breakfast potage into bowls as her brood lumbers to the breakfast table with tangled hair, broken bones, blackened eyes, and wounded bodies stitched back together.

It was as if every morning Mom renewed her contract with us. Often she said it in so many words: All right, I'll keep you all for another day.

On bad days, when Mom was taking it from every direction, one of us (the youngest of us available at the time was usually drafted) would be sent to our mother after the dust had settled to ask her a simple question: "Mom, if you had to do it all over again, would you still have all of us kids?" She would sit there in a daze, mumbling incoherently, but we knew her answer would come loud and clear the next morning, when she made breakfast for us.



When Mike was ten, he threw a hoe over the fence at Greg, who was nine, because Greg wouldn't let him pass through the tall wooden gate to the backyard. The sharp metal end of the hoe hit Greg on the crown of his head and they were both sent to bed that afternoon by Mrs. Trimble our babysitter, who never really knew what to do with juvenile delinquents *but* send them to bed. It didn't matter that Greg was bleed-

ing like a stuck pig. To bed they went. You can only imagine what they looked like when Mom got home, something out of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, no doubt. Years later, reflecting on that day, Mike remembers sitting with Mom at the kitchen table. "She looked at me with tears in her eyes and said, 'Michael, it's because of you I'm going to hell.'" The next morning, however, the slate was wiped clean, the contract renewed for another day, and we knew this, of course, because of the waft of Cream of Wheat that greeted us as we woke from slumber.



These days, when it seems as if the weight of the world's sin is bearing down on me or when the burden of the sin of my own making leaves me gasping a bit, I make myself a bowl of Cream of Wheat. It doesn't so much take me back to the more innocent days of my youth—because, quite frankly, I wasn't so innocent then and neither was the world. But it does remind me that if my mother could be so forgiving of her brood, whose daily duty was to put one more gray hair in her scalp, how much more God forgives us for all our bone-headed, faith-defying, senseless and stupefying sins. Flannery O'Connor, the Catholic writer who grew up in what she referred to as "the Christ-haunted South," put it this way: "The world has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for." To this day I find that truth almost too much to bear.

Divine mercy—in the face of human selfishness and self-inflicted brokenness—is, to borrow a phrase from the explorer David Folsom, "a terrible beauty." Such an extravagant love stuns me by its power to heal, but it also scares me because in its healing wake it leaves me, at least for a while, disoriented. Is it really possible that mercy has lasting merit? Is it possible that the Cross of Christ really did save the whole world from the power of darkness? Can the last word really be love?

In a world humanly predicated on power and control, God's mercy draws its eternal strength from sacrifice. In a world where human justice is almost always laced with righteous vengeance, God's mercy strikes a discordant chord, at least when it hits the human ear, because it tells quite a different story: You are always welcomed back; you can always

come back home. No life will ever be defined—at least by God—by its worst mistake or greatest sin.



One evening Dad came home from work in a surly mood. He plopped himself down into his worn and weathered easy chair, snapped the evening paper open in one motion, took a long sip from his hastily concocted bourbon and water, and dared anyone to disturb him. Most of



No life will ever be defined

—at least by God—

by its worst mistake

or greatest sin.

us wisely retreated to quiet corners of the house, but not Brian and Jack. They were arguing—oblivious to the wisp of steam rising from the awaking volcano nearby—in their bedroom located off the living room. They were fighting over whose turn it was to use the state-of-the-art manual typewriter Mom had picked up for them earlier that day, as a surprise, from the business supply rental store in town. She had rented it for the week to the tune of twenty bucks.

When the argument reached its fever pitch and they were tugging on the typewriter, each brother refusing to surrender, Dad appeared before them. “I’ll solve this problem for you,” he said as he took the typewriter from their grimy hands. As he raised the typewriter over his head in preparation for dropping it definitively to the ground, Mom appeared in the near distance. As Dad released his hands, we could all hear her scream, “Don’t, Bill! It’s a rental!” The word *rental* lingered there in the air as the typewriter made its way inexorably to the bedroom floor, shattering into a hundred pieces. Dad returned to his paper and evening cocktail without saying a word. All of us assembled in Brian and Jack’s bedroom and, along with our mother, dropped to our knees and scooped up all the pieces of typewriter we could find. And for the next hour we tried to put that typewriter back together, in utter silence, lest we stir the volcanic giant again.

As it turned out, we tossed the machine away. But it was the face of our mother as she watched us unceremoniously deposit the typewriter in the garbage can that stays with me to this day. You could tell she was replaying the whole episode in her mind and actually enjoying it, for the faintest hint of a smile appeared on her face, one that said clearly to me, “Ah, now this is a story we’ll be telling for a long, long time.” And she was right.

The sin of that day surrendered to the story that has over the years fed the Hannon clan with side-aching laughter. I remember something Thomas Merton once wrote about sin that reflects perfectly that day years ago: “Even sin has played an unwilling part in saving sinners, for the infinite mercy of God cannot be prevented from drawing the greatest good out of the greatest evil.” It is a fitting punishment to sin: to so bathe it in the waters of merciful laughter that eventually it no longer looks like itself anymore.



God’s mercy permeates all things. It is the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the bread we eat; and with each passing day I become more aware of the truth that God’s glory shines most brightly through mercy, that God’s power and might finds its greatest strength in compassion and forgiveness. For when God’s mercy takes hold of us, the human heart comes to believe once again that broken bones, broken spirits, broken lives, and even broken typewriters will never have the last word. Like soothing waters, mercy washes over us and removes the stain of guilt and shame and dares us to imagine a life untangled from the snare of sin. I can’t imagine anything bringing more glory to God than that. More than any other song, it is the song of mercy that resounds through all of creation.

“Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice,” the psalmist sings in Psalm 96. “Let the sea roar and all that fills it; let the field exalt and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD; for he is coming.” Later, Isaiah 42 would add coastlands and deserts and mountaintops to this cacophony of nature.

The stories of this book echo this hymn to the geography of God's mercy. The earth, our home and God's home, sings of the glory of God and its melody is mercy. It is a terrible beauty, this song of God's love, because it draws us ever more deeply, if we let it, into the mysterious power that forgives and heals and makes whole, all the while stripping away all that protects us and holds us back. In the end, we come to surrender to this song's refrain, words of hope tripping from the very lips of God, a promise sealed with a merciful kiss: "All right," God sings, in so many words, "I'll keep you all for another day." And we know that He really means forever.



Patrick Hannon, CSC
Colorado Springs, Colorado
Good Friday, 2007

ONE



**A Dwelling in the Forest
The Silent Work of Mercy**

Do not fear, O Jacob my servant,
Jeshuron whom I have chosen.
For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour my spirit upon your descendents,
and my blessing on your offspring.
They shall spring up like a green tamarisk,
like willows by flowing streams.

Isaiah 44



The Trees that Transcend Fear

Apparently when you grow old, sometimes all you have left to show for your life is a squeaky electronic appliance of a piano. And a bed with a threadbare quilt neatly pressed upon it by the window. And a chair that faces a wall of framed photographed faces frozen in time smiling back at you. Such a fate it is for some, Shakespeare's sixth age on life's stage, when the clothes hang generously upon the bony frame and the stentorian voice "turns again towards childish treble" and the sturdy oak of one's dreams is whittled down seemingly.

And then, there's Catherine.

I visit Catherine on the first Friday of every other month. She's eighty-two years old now and lives by herself in a small room in an assisted care facility in Colorado Springs. Hers are the rasping piano and quilted bed by the window and chair facing the wall of photographs. Her husband has gone to God and so has one of her daughters. She told me once that a well-meaning friend stopped by one day and gently upbraided her for her wall of smiling faces. "Why do you want to be reminded of all these people? It will only make you sad," the friend had said. "Of course they make me sad," Catherine explained to me, "but she didn't seem to understand that they also make me smile."

And why wouldn't they? They are photographs of husband and children and grandchildren, of kin and friends through the years. And she has a story that goes with each one. Over her bed there's a picture of her with her mom and dad, and she's just a wee child in a lace dress and shiny shoes. She hasn't told me the story that goes with that one yet.



For barely a fortnight, the aspen of Colorado's high country are in full and glorious splendor. "Trembling poplars" they are called. They are the tree of the autumn equinox and of old age, and it's not hard to see why, if you know anything about the Rocky Mountain aspen: While in-

dividual aspens are relatively short-lived—about the span of a generous human life of eighty to a hundred years, a stand (or grove) of aspen, by virtue of its unique way of reproducing by root sprouts and not seedlings, can be over 8,000 years old. One aspen male clone in the Wasatch Mountains of Utah occupies over seventeen acres, has more than 47,000 stems (each “stem” is a separate aspen tree), and is said to be over one million years old. An ancient grove that springs eternal.

In the autumn cool the aspen's leaves are transformed and become, as it were, a deciduous acclamation of that particular life that springs from death, a lilting hymn of praise to the Creator who must, like all of us, quiver with joy every year when the aspen are ripe and turn to



*It is the stillness
of the aspen grove in autumn
that entices us once again
to consider the power of God,
which is abiding and abundant,
enduring and endless,
and ultimately mysterious.*

gold. They remind us that death never has the last word, that from the wood of the cross (carved from aspen wood no doubt) sprout blossoms still. As the story goes, in ancient Ireland the coffin maker's measuring rod, the stick he used to measure the corpse for the box, was fashioned from aspen wood, apparently to remind the dead that this was not the end.

It is the stillness of the aspen grove in autumn that entices us once again to consider the power of God, which is abiding and abundant, enduring and endless, and ultimately mysterious. Each dangling golden leaf tangoing with the wind seems to testify to divine mercy's singular victory. Imagine then the forest of whispering aspen at dusk and hear with hope God's response to a weary world.

Resilient, abundant, prodigious, defiant, utterly majestic. And in the gloaming season, aspen are the most eloquent trees that transcend fear and, in a golden sweep of hope, hint of resurrection.



Catherine has, in the autumn of her life, grown accustomed to the laughter that mingles naturally with her tears. She spends a lot of time these days quietly looking at the faces on her wall and remembering the stories that go with each of them. They are not unlike the golden leaves of the autumn aspen, those faces and their stories that evoke sweet sadness. The rustling golden leaves, like Catherine's photographs, echo on the wings of silence the voice of Yahweh spoken centuries ago to a people who once grew faint with fear. Like poplars beside the flowing waters, my darling Catherine, your descendants will spring up and flourish. You will endure. And so, there's no reason to be afraid anymore. The golden forest of autumn aspen tells us so.