These reflections were developed by two Secular Franciscans in the Atlantic area of the Regional Fraternity of Eastern Canada, Doug Hagen and Sherrill Guimond. In a shorter form, they were presented at an Area meeting, and then, these texts became the basis for one of the retreats hosted by St. Francis of Assisi Fraternity, Cornwall, PEI.

We are using the version of the Beatitudes found in Matt 5:1-12.

**Fifth Beatitude: Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.**

The story of a mother who approached Napoleon for a pardon for her son. Napoleon replied that the young man had twice committed a certain crime and that for justice to be done, the man deserved to die. “But I don’t ask for justice,” said the mother, “I plead for mercy.” “But your son does not deserve mercy,” said Napoleon. “It would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all that I ask for him,” replied the mother.

Mercy is a gift given to those who do not deserve it. We often hear of this in a legal setting after a person has been convicted and guilt has been assigned. When the sentence is about to be handed down, it is mercy that is sought, not innocence. At this point, your only hope is mercy; mercy that you don’t get what you deserve.

By the same token, we must not confuse mercy with emotionalism. If we see a TV commercial about starving klds and we weep and want to help, this does not mean we are merciful. We can be emotional without being merciful.

People sometimes do good things not out of a heart of mercy, but for selfish reasons, e.g. tax write-offs, to look good for their own sense of well-being, politicians – photo-op at Food Bank. Paul writes in Corinthians 13:3: “If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

Those who hunger and thirst for justice may lose sight of the fact that we are all sinful and weak. Maybe Jesus placed this beatitude here to act as a balance. He tells us that justice must be tempered by mercy. Even as we struggle for justice, we need to love and forgiver e. Mercy leads to concern for the wrong doer as well as for the wrong that is being done.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to be merciful to others, without knowing one’s own need for mercy from God. It is from the sense of helplessness in the face of sin that one calls out to God for mercy.

Jesus lets us see this Beatitude in action in the parable of the good Samaritan. The Samaritan does not question why this man is lying on the roadside. He does not inquire into the man’s past. He is not concerned whether the injured man is a good person or whether he has the same religious beliefs or political convictions. The Samaritan sees only one thing. Here is a person in trouble who needs help and he gives it generously.

It is said of St. Francis that he never questioned anyone who was seeking alms or help to ascertain their need. He simply gave.

We have all been injured and I am sure we may have injured. Parents have been hurt by things children said or did. These are past. We learn to move on.

If we look back on the beatitudes from poverty of spirit to mourning to meekness to hungering and thirsting for righteousness, how does this lead up to the beatitude of mercy? As Sherrill has said; o one of the dangers of living a righteous life is that self-righteousness is always just a breath away. It is very easy for me to list the sins I haven’t committed, and to catalogue sins of others, to fill pages with my good deeds. Remember the two people that Christ describes in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector? Compare the words and actions of the two. The tax collector’s action is a seed of the Jesus prayer; “Lord Jesus Christ …..

Christ is constantly ready to be merciful to anyone because He is mercy itself. Each time we recite the “Out Father”, we ask for the same measure of mercy from God that we show to others….

To paraphrase St. Theresa of Avila: “Christ has no body on earth but ours; no hands but ours; no feet but ours. Ours are the eyes through which Christ’s compassion is to look out to the world. Ours are the feet through which He is to go about doing good. Ours are the hands through which He is to bless people now.”

Remember when St. Francis hugged the leper?

Who are the lepers as we in the twenty-first century?

Justice, courage, self-control and wisdom were prominent virtues in Jesus’ day but not mercy. The world of Jesus’ day was a world without mercy, a cruel world in which the poor were crushed, the innocent silenced, little children brutally murdered or callously abandoned, in which the chief amusement and sport was the amphitheatre were men fought to the death. The ancient world was a world without mercy. The Romans despised pity, the Stoics looked upon mercy with suspicion, the Pharisees harboured little mercy in their hearts.

Against that background, the fifth Beatitude was revolutionary because it introduced a virtue foreign to everyday life. God’s people are motivated to show mercy by the mercy thety themselves have been shown by God. Being merciful to others is the natural result of receiving the mercy of Go – and provides evidence that we have received it. The key to becoming a merciful person is to become a broken person. You get the power to show mercy from the real feeling in your heart that you owe everything you are and everything you have to sheer diving mercy. Father William J. Bausch is in his book “Storytelling Imagination and Faith” tells the following story: once a very bad man died and went before the judgment throne. Before him stood Abraham, David, Peter and Luke. A chilly silence hung heavy in the room as an unseen voice began to read the details of the man’s life. There was nothing good that was recorded. When the voice concluded, Abraham spoke: “Men like you cannot enter the heavenly kingdom. You must leave.” “Father Abraham,” the man cried, “I do not defend myself. I have no choice but to ask for mercy. Certainly you understand. Though you lied to save your own life, saying your wife was your sister, by the grace and mercy of God you became a blessing to all nations.”

David interrupted, “Abraham has spoken correctly. You have committed evil and heinous crimes. You do not belong in the kingdom of light.” The man faced the great king and cried, “Don of Jesse, it is true I am a wicked man. Yet I dare as you for forgiveness. You slept with Uriah’s wife and later, to cover your sin, arranged his death. I ask only forgiveness as you have known it.”

Peter was next to speak. “Unlike David, you have shown no love to God. By your acid tongue and your vile temper you have wounded the Son of God.” “I should be silent.” The man muttered. “The only way I have used the blessed name of Jesus is in anger. Still, Simon, son of John, I plead for grace. Though you walked by his side and listened to words from his own lips, you slept when he needed you in the garden, and you denied him three times in his night of greatest need.”

Then Luke the evangelist spoke, “You must leave. You have not been found worthy of the Kingdom of God.

The man’s head bowed sadly for a moment before a spark lit in his face. “My life has been recorded correctly.” The man began slowly. “I am guilty as charged. Yet I know there is a place for me in the blessed kingdom. Abraham, David and Peter will plead my cause because they know of the weakness of man and the mercy of God. You, blessed physician, will open the gates to me because you have written of God’s great love for the likes of me. Don’t you recognize me? I am the lost sheep that the Good Shepherd carried home. I am your younger, prodigal brother.”

And the gates opened and Luke embraced the sinner.

A day or so after his election, Pope Francis spoke during the Angelus. He stressed God’s capacity to forgive. The themes were the woman at the well and the prodigal son. He said that mercy is the Lord’s most powerful message. Also, that is not easy to trust oneself to the mercy of God because God’s mercy is such an unfathomable abyss – but we must do it. He advised us to ask for the grace of never tiring to ask for God’s mercy because God never tires of pardoning.

It can be hard to fully understand the beatitudes; they are only one line each! So that’s why we use other passages to help us understand them. The parable of the unmerciful servant is an illustration of what it means to be truly merciful, and of what our motivation for being merciful should be. Jesus tells us the parable in response to Peter’s question in Vs. 21 as to how many times he should forgive his brother. By suggesting 7 times, Peter feels he is being more than generous, and is really justifying himself and seeking to feed his ego. Religious leaders taught a limit on forgiveness and mercy, but Jesus has other ideas – Vs. 22 suggests a radical view of mercy that was as upside-down as what has gone before it.

Mercy is not a quality we expect to see much these days. Instead, our eyes, ears and emotions are assaulted daily even hourly in the case of radio and TV news items, by bigotry, scams, prejudice and intolerance. Acts of mercy are so rare that, when they do occur, they make headline news, replete with pictures, in newspapers and magazines and on television. This is not to say that mercy is not admired. It indeed is, which accounts for it making headlines when the media hear of it happening. Though people admire the merciful and wish they were more like them, they rarely take the opportunity to express mercy when such a chance arises.

The Pharisees, harsh in their self-righteous judgments of others, showed little mercy. Jesus saying of them in Matthew 23:23, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the other undone.” This difference makes apparent how far apart God and men are on the value we should place upon specific qualities of character.

We need to remind ourselves from time to time that the Beatitudes represent signs of those who are truly Christ’s disciples. They help identify those upon whom God’s blessings rest to aid them in living joyfully. From another angle, they describe the nature of true happiness.

The truly merciful are too aware of their own sins to deal with others in sharp condemnation, so they constrain themselves to deal humbly and kindly with those in need. Nothing moves us to forgive others like the amazing realization that god has forgiven our sins. Mercy in God’s children begins by experiencing His forgiveness of the, and perhaps nothing proves more convincingly that we have been forgiven than our readiness to forgive.

A merciful person demonstrates three characteristics: 1. A merciful person is understanding. Too often we condemn and find fault with others without having all the facts. We need to get all the facts about another person before we pass judgment on them. When we learn to do that, we will become less judgmental and more understanding and patient towards the people in our lives. 2. A merciful person is loving. The parable of the Good Samaritan presents three philosophies of life: the philosophy of the thieves who attacked and robbed the man, leaving him beside the road half dead, was “beat them up”, philosophy of the priest and Levite who passed by the wounded man was “pass them up”, but, the philosophy of the Good Samaritan was “lift them up.” We must ask God to baptize us with the “Spirit of Mercifulness” so that like Him, we may go about doing good instead of going about. The merciful person is a loving person who demonstrates this concern by deeds and not by words only. 3. A merciful person is forgiving. A story is told of E. Stanley Jones which beautifully describes mercy. In Foo Chow are three graves side by side. Two are the graves of Nellie and Topsy Saunders, the daughters of a widow in Melbourne, Australia. Those two women went out as missionaries to Fuh-Kien, China, and both were murdered In 1895, when the news of their death reached their mother in Australia, she was 62 years old. What do you think she did?

Of course, she was filled with grief at the loss of her two daughters. But she didn’t turn against God. She didn’t become bitter, resentful or cynical. She sold all that she had. She went to the place where her daughters had been murdered. She learned the Chinese language, set up a school and gave the remaining 20 years of her life to teaching the people who had murdered her daughters about God’s love and mercy. Who was better qualified to teach it than she, for she practiced what she preached. She died at 82 and was buried beside her two daughters. The merciful person is a forgiving person.

As stated earlier, each of the Beatitudes contains a promise. The promise contained in this fifth Beatitude is that the merciful shall receive mercy, because they are capable of receiving it. The unmerciful make receiving mercy an impossibility.