

Casting Your Relational Sins Into the 'Depths of the Sea'

When the water receded at my lake house this fall, the land under my dock was littered with big rocks. These rocks weren't the normal rocks that line the bottom of the lake. They were rocks with colorful words written all over them in Sharpie. They had phrases like "being mean to my mom," "acting selfish," "anger" and "going along with the crowd" written on them.

These were the rocks that were tossed into the lake at camps with the seventh- through twelfth-graders last summer. They were our experiential learning assignment as well as my version of preparing these teenagers. We do something like it every summer. We've tossed rotten fruit (Ps. 103:12), smashed clay pots (Judg. 7) and more recently, rocks. All to illustrate some version of the theme from Micah 7:19, "He will again have compassion on us. He will tread down our iniquities, and cast all of our sins into the depths of the sea." In other words, mercy.

Mercy means I've been seen in the light and the dark. Mercy is kindness shown at a time when a penalty is expected—deserved, even. Mercy means I'm seen for all that I am, and loved, still.

The fruit-tossing/jar-smashing/rock-throwing experiential lessons are the ones that stay with the kids more than anything else they do at camp. It's when they don't just hear about mercy. They experience it. They take all the feelings of confusion and darkness inside them and toss them into the depths of God's love. They know His mercy in deeper and richer ways than ever before, because they can.

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with

which He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Eph. 2:4–5).

"It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, he embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ" (Eph. 2:4–5, MSG).

In January of 2016, Pope Francis delivered a Jubilee of Mercy Message to boys and girls ages 13 to 16. In it, he was inviting them to an upcoming event in Rome. But in reality, he was inviting them to much more.

"I encourage you to realize that each of you is a child of God (1 John 3:1). I would like to invite you one by one, calling you by name, as Jesus does each day. For you know that your names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20), in the heart of the Father, that merciful heart which is the source of all reconciliation and kindness.

Notice ... he's talking to them and mirroring their identity. He's also respecting that, as 13- to 16-year-olds, they have the capacity to respond. He says that God's merciful heart is the source of all reconciliation and kindness.

He goes on to say:

"To be merciful means to grow in a love which is courageous, generous and real. It means to grow physically and spiritually. ... Yours is a time of life which is full of amazing changes. Everything seems possible and impossible all at once. I repeat what I said to some of your friends: "Remain steadfast in the journey of faith, with firm hope in the Lord. This is the secret of our journey! He gives us the courage to swim against the tide. Jesus gives us this courage! ... With Him we can do great things; He will give us the joy of being His disciples, His witnesses. Commit yourselves to great ideals, to the most important things."

Pope Francis is leading these teenagers from identity to mercy. And then on to meaning, which we'll talk about in the next chapter. He's calling them to have courage to reflect. He's challenging them not only to know God's mercy, but to show it. That's how mercy works. It's relational. Luke 6:36 says, "Be therefore merciful, even as your Father is merciful."

Martin Buber, an existential philosopher of the late 1800s and early 1900s, said that "spirituality is lived out at the intersection of our lives—at the meeting between you and me." He went on to coin the phrase "relational spirituality." That's what mercy is ... it only exists within the context of relationship. It starts with the Father and spills over onto others. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matt.5:7).

Pope Francis had the right idea wrapped in beautiful words. Teenagers are all about relationship. They have the longing and capacity to connect deeply and directly with others. They want to be known and loved for all of the darkness and light that's inside of them. God's mercy offers that kind of love and then frees them to offer it to others. {eoa}

*Excerpted from Are My Kids on Track? by **Sissy Goff, David Thomas** and **Melissa Trevathan** (Bethany House Publishers, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016). Used by permission.*

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