

ABCs of Wisdom – M – Mercy

Mercy is most precious when it is least deserved.

We are a judgmental people. We find fault with those who don't hold our views and we have our ideas of what should happen to them. Only a wise person knows when mercy is needed. Wisdom doesn't necessarily come from a judge or jury. It comes from the heart. We ought to give it more than lip service.

You may recall hearing your mother say, "Lord, have mercy!" or "Mercy me." Mercy is used in naming facilities such as Mercy Medical Center, Mercy Health System and Sisters of Mercy. Has the true meaning of mercy lost its flavor? Mercy is more than a word. It is compassion and forgiveness in action.

I wasn't merciful as a young person. It was after life knocked me down a few notches that I came to have compassion for others. After a divorce and raising children as a single mother, I developed a heart for other women traveling that rough road.

When I started working with single mothers, I established the nonprofit, SMORE for Women (Single Mothers – Overjoyed, Rejuvenated and Empowered!). I thought that we could offer them a day or a weekend of time-off, give them a few gifts and send them home happier. I learned after several years of hosting events that there wasn't any long-term change in their lives as a result. Oh, the events we shared were great. The moms received some much-needed guidance and time to share with others like themselves. But they needed more.

I began to see that their real need was encouragement and support for the long haul and raising kids alone is a very long haul. They didn't need judgement, though many are quick to offer that. They needed mercy.

Now SMORE offers support to single moms in college and on their way to practical employment. We give them encouragement throughout their time as a student. It has been documented that college students who don't have a support system are seven times less likely to finish and earn a college degree. The most valuable gift we can give a single mother is a way forward to personal independence. We give a large dose of mercy to our moms, regardless of how she came to be a single mother head of household.

It requires wise discernment to know when mercy ought to be applied rather than judgement.

The theme in *Les Misérables* of mercy versus judgement reminds us how precious is the decision to be merciful. The bishop shows mercy and doesn't accuse Jean Valjean who has attempted to steal the silver candlesticks from the bishop's home. So intriguing is this story that a musical, a movie and now a television series have been made from this classic novel by Victor Hugo. Maybe this is because in our desire to see justice we have forgotten the need for mercy.

It comes from the heart, especially a heart that is open to it. It is gentle and comes from a source outside our human nature. Showing mercy doesn't require great effort. It does require great wisdom.

In Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, Portia says, "The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath." Oh, to live in a world of gentle mercy.

"I've always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice." – Abraham Lincoln