



“[This loved one of mine] was lost
and has now been found.”
And they began to celebrate.

—Luke 15:24

WEEK 8

God's Love for Us— Forgiving Mercy

Guide: How God Must Rejoice

This week we will walk around in God's love for us. We want to taste—to fully enjoy—the forgiveness that is God's gift to us.

Though we have been trying to end each reflection on sinfulness with the reality of God's mercy, during this week we will try to let God's merciful forgiveness fill the background of our entire week.

We begin by focusing on God. The photo of a mother's embrace of her daughter will inspire us throughout this week to keep our focus on God. This woman's face will help us to begin to imagine the powerful depth of God's embrace of us.

As I wake up, put on my slippers or robe each morning, and begin to get moving, I can focus, for a moment, on God's delight in me. *How God must rejoice in my coming to know how much I'm loved and forgiven!* As I go through each day, I can recall various images that help my spirit soar with accepting the intimacy of forgiving love's embrace.

I can imagine the joy I have experienced when a loved one's biopsy came back negative, or when friends found the

child they were waiting to adopt, or when someone I care deeply about receives my love and enjoys it. *How much more God rejoices in us this week!*

We resist the temptation to figure out *how* God could forgive our sins, our patterns—all we have done and all we have failed to do. The answer to that question is wrapped up in the mystery of love—love without condition or limit. We might imagine forgiving a spouse or child or someone we love simply because our love is so much greater and stronger than the wrong that was done. *And we tell ourselves how much greater God's love for me must be, to forgive me so freely, so completely!*

There is a phrase we use to describe something so wonderful. We say, "It's *incredible*; I can hardly *believe* it!" This week we enter into our desire to not only believe God's forgiving mercy to me but also to experience it, accept it, and celebrate it. *How much that must be God's own desire for each of us this week!*

Use the resources that follow to enrich the week's retreat experience. You will find other resources on the Online Retreat Web site. Consider sharing the graces of this week there. We will never know how a gift given to us might truly help another.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

This is not an easy week for many of us. In the third parable of mercy, which Jesus tells to those who criticize his eating and drinking with sinners (Luke 15), the younger son's return to his father is full of remorse, "*I have sinned against God in heaven and against you. I am no longer good enough to be called your son.*" The older son is full of resentment that the father forgives the younger son so freely. And like the religious leaders that criticize Jesus, he won't join in the celebration. It is not easy for us to get beyond feeling terrible about our sin or the patterns of sinfulness in our lives. And even when

we find ourselves in the embrace of Forgiving Love, there's an older brother's or sister's voice inside us, putting a damper on the celebration.

This is the week to surrender to God's embrace. Look at the photo over and over. Imagine being in that embrace. Stay there. Don't rush it. Let all the resistance melt away. Receive it. Enjoy it. Rest in it. What is the one who is embracing me feeling and expressing in that moment of togetherness? Throughout this week, whatever I'm doing, in those in-between times, I can close my eyes and imagine Jesus holding me like that.

This is the week to *smile*—to wear it on our face and to feel it deeply. A smile and a deep breath go together very well. They prepare the way for a joyful and wonderfully refreshing inner peace.

Do all the rest of my problems go away? Is my life back together? Have I reached the depths of spiritual freedom? Of course not. We keep reminding ourselves that this is a *journey*, and each week is an important *next step*. This is a critical next step—to experience and enjoy and celebrate, because I am a loved sinner.

Perhaps this week I can find several things to do that will lift my spirits and reinforce this week of enjoyment and peace. Plan it; make some change in the routine; give the week a different feel.

Most important, this week is about *gratitude and expressing it*. What am I *feeling* as I rest in that embrace? After all I have done and failed to do, and considering the patterns that still shape my life—to be forgiven so completely! How does that feel? If tears come forth, let them flow. How do I want to respond to the one who has loved me this much? I need to say those words in thanksgiving. To be forgiven is a tremendous gift. We want to express our gratitude in words that claim it and allow us to enter even more deeply into the joy and peace.

Rituals are important. They involve our bodies and *last* in our memories. Perhaps I will put my expression of gratitude on paper, in words that express all that I feel, addressing it directly to Jesus or to God. As I read “In These or Similar Words . . .,” I can find *my* words and say them out loud or put them in writing. For some of us, standing in the solitude of our room, with arms stretching up toward heaven, wonderfully expresses how we feel. For some of us, it will be important to recall a song that we sing to mark this very special week. Perhaps I will celebrate the Eucharist this week or on Sunday, or participate in my faith community’s worship, with a deeper sense of joy.

The measure for each of us this week will be how we go to sleep each night. If I can put my clothes on the chair and take off those slippers with a growing sense of joy in my heart—because I’m a sinner who is loved *beyond belief*—then the grace of this week will fill my spirit with peace.

For the Journey: Learning God’s Ways

This week, we celebrate God’s mercy for us and our world. Those of you who are parents or grandparents or uncles or aunts have had the exciting experience of encouraging the very young to begin walking. You get wonderfully thrilled when they take that first step and then find yourself laughing when the little one goes boom.

The little one might want to cry and look to you for your response. Your smile, your outreaching hands, your gentle touch, is the beginning of his or her rising.

What would happen if your disappointment and anger at the child’s failure were to show on your face and in your gestures? The child’s image of self would be quite negative, and the getting up again would be slower, if at all.

God’s mercy is more than forgiveness; it is also about raising us up that we might continue learning how to walk in God’s ways. Mercy is not merely a judicial action, a court

decision. God’s mercy is a relational gesture that flows from the very center of God’s creative and sustaining love for us.

When Jesus is moved with compassion for a person or the crowds, the meaning is not so much pity or even forgiveness. Jesus is pictured as being moved from deep down in his stomach, where the emotions were thought to reside. Jesus is moved to reach out, teach, feed, and lead his lost and fallen fellow humans.

Praying this week is meant to free us from the fear that God is judicially angry or disappointed with our having fallen more than once. We are invited to receive God’s gentle touch and God’s encouragement to rise and continue learning what it is to be God’s disciple.

Mercy is above all of God’s works, and we pray in the experience of letting Jesus be Jesus: “the one who saves.”

So we begin this week celebrating our holiness, which involves the truth of our needing mercy, of being embraced by the truth of God’s faithful upraising love. This mercy, this compassion, if received gratefully, will ultimately free us for the more important faith walk into God’s future and our own. Pray gently, Jesus came to save us not to solve us.

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Lord,

It makes no sense. How is it that I can look back over my sins, my failings, and my faults and still be so aware of your love for me? Don’t you ever get tired because I so often fail to love you and others as you would want?

But there it is: the love and the mercy. I have this image of the prodigal son trudging up the road, reciting his apology, nervous and anxious and looking up to see his father running down the road with his arms held wide. What strikes me is the joy in the father as he runs toward his son. I sense your joy in me as you welcome me and take me into your arms. I can

tell that you have been out on the road every night waiting and waiting for my return with such vast love in your heart.

That's a wonderful feeling! I know I started by saying it made no sense but that's only because I'm trying to think of you loving in the same limited way I love. The photo touches me because it is such a human face of love and emotion. I see the warm, loving mother holding her daughter so tightly and I think of you, dear God and the depth of your love for me. Thank you so much for the depth of your love. It is so all-encompassing and I can take joy in it, relish it, and feel its comforting and secure warmth and strength.

Help me to carry this love throughout my week. Help me to really believe this love and not to listen to the voice inside me that tells me I'm no good and not worthy of your love.

Let me sit in silence with this love. Let me feel it enter into me, warm me. Let me receive your love, and let it surround me in your loving embrace. I am so grateful for this gift. I know I am unworthy of it and that makes it even more precious. Your love for me is so deep and vast despite the fact that you know me so well, with all of my flaws.

Thank you, Lord, for this gift of forgiveness and love. May I live this week always aware in the background of my days of your personal love for me.

Scripture Readings

John 4:5–42

John 9:1–4

John 8:3–11

Hosea 14:1–10

Luke 15:11–32