



Day 7 | Monday, March 14, 2022
Presenter Bei Bernal

A Good measure

Growing up in the Philippines, my siblings and I can only go shopping once a year for our school uniforms, shoes and Christmas outfits. I remember always feeling embarrassed because my mom would make me try clothes in front of other people at the store. She would measure me, but I would always end up with clothes or shoes that are a size bigger. She would say "It's good to have space...it is so that there is room to grow."

I believe God, like my mother, measures me that way...God looks at me, sizes me up, and always know "there is room for me to grow..." – not in a way that I need to improve. But It's about that my potential for goodness, compassion and mercy is more than I can imagine for myself.

It's more like the way my papa would make me jump up and down every year during New Year's Eve to make sure I grow taller. Well, I stopped growing at 14 years old, but he still insisted that I jump up and down (and I still do) because of his belief that I can grow taller. I imagine God to be like that... that God actually believes I can grow taller...that God measures me with so much room that I can imagine for myself.

I am currently a "rookie" principal for a middle school. Every day, I get to be the person that every kid who gets in trouble must talk to. I ask them questions about what happened, how did their actions impact themselves and others and how can they have done things differently. Most days, I end the conversation with "alright, go to recess!" which is my own version of "Go and sin no more!" But there are times, when a student's action is really serious, when parents have been called and the conversation has been long. At the end, I would ask them a question that I learned from watching our school President Fr. Jeff McDougall: I would ask, "how do you think I see you?" The students would normally respond, "that I'm a bad kid." This moment is sacred because I get to say what I imagine Jesus would say, "No, I think you are a good kid." Then I remind them of the good things I have seen them do. Lastly, I will ask them the question "what did you hear me say about how I think of you?" As they repeat the words, I can immediately sense the relaxing of their body, the peacefulness in their face and the slight relief in their voice. This is how I imagine God is to each one of us – never condemning and measures with such room to grow into who we really are which is "good."

It is easy for me to follow Jesus' commandment of "stop judging and to be merciful as God is merciful" when dealing with children. But I have to admit, I struggle with certain things that I consider plain evil. How can I be merciful to people like Vladimir Putin – as I see images of children killed and affected by his decision to invade Ukraine? What about the men who killed Ahmaud Arbery? What about the gunman who killed all those children in Sandy Hook? Or the people who keeps hurting the families by claiming that it was a hoax? So many, so many that when I think about them, I get overwhelmed with anger and hatred. One time, I was so angry with a non-conviction that I posted the photo of the assailant on my FB page with the goal of discrediting him. A friend of mine messaged me privately and oh so gently reminded me that what I did wasn't me...that she knows me to be a good person; that perhaps I can instead focus on helping the victim. She reminded me that the person whose picture I have posted in hate is still a person with worth and dignity...that God also loves that person. I immediately took the post down. My friend showed me the mercy and compassion of God. She did not judge me according to what I did. She measured me with so much room and reminded me to fill it with my real goodness. Jesús calls me to do the same for others even to those who I may deem don't deserve it. Only with God's grace I can do so.

A good measure, packed together and shaken down

Anyone who has ever poured flour, sugar or any kind of grain in a container know how packed they can look but once shook, there's suddenly empty spaces present. My father certainly poured his life into work. He grew up poor and worked his way to an engineering degree and eventually owned a business. He told me he had 3 goals: to own a Mercedes Benz, to own a pair of Ferragamo shoes and lastly, a Rolex watch. He said that he would know he has succeeded in life once he has owned those 3 things. Before the age of 50, he had all those three things. At the same time, by the age of 50 – he had developed pancreatic cancer and died suddenly. This all sounds tragic of course, but for two years before he died, he went through a life transformation. At this time, he felt he had everything he wanted, and it seemed like his life is as "packed together" as it could be. He started to notice pain in his stomach, but the doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with him. In his fear, he turned to God. We witnessed a huge change in him, from someone who never showed any devotion to God into a father who led his family to daily rosaries and weekly pilgrimages. It seemed that his mysterious illness "shook" him down—and there in that sudden empty space, God showed him that there is room for more – not more success but more faith, love, forgiveness and peace. I have come to believe that those two years was God's way of preparing my papa for his passing. He experienced a new life even before his death.

How many of us has seemed that our life was "packed together" before the pandemic? How much of our life were we pouring into things? Covid 19 certainly shook us down. In so many ways then and until now, we have been forced to see that there is room for more. For some it was room for more time with self and others. For others, more room for a different perspective...more room for change...more room for appreciation for healthcare workers. For many, it also meant room for anxiety and fear.

Pandemic, illness, tragedy, war...no one is immune from being shaken down. Suddenly these empty spaces are revealed which can feel like a void where we find ourselves asking God, "why, why did you let this happen?" This, as Leonetta Elaiho pointed out on Day 3 of the Novena, is when we find solidarity with Jesus as he cried out "My God, why have you forsaken me?" and not hear an answer.

Here is then what confronts us...this empty space. Perhaps instead of asking why, the better question to ask God is “what do I do with this space?” and the Gospel reading gives us the answer. We need to let God fill it. And apparently, according to Jesus, God fills it so much that it spills over.

A good measure, packed together and shaken down, overflowing

I think most people believe that I studied theology because I am a very faith filled person. The truth is I got into theology because I question everything. Even the basic teaching of Christianity that God loves me unconditionally took many years of prodding and testing.

My husband, Joe, is the opposite. I asked him last week, “Was there ever a time in your life that you questioned God’s love?” He said no. “Not even once?” “No” and shakes his head. He is not being arrogant thinking he is the most loveable person – it is not about him but about the incredible capacity of God to love him no matter what. So for him, all he needs to do is be open to that love – to give space and room for God to fill and let it overflow.

I used to do this exercise with high school students where I put a bowl in front of them and start pouring it with marbles. I keep pouring and it overflows. I tell them, “This is what Jesus is telling us, that if we leave ourselves open to God’s love, God will pour so much that it overflows.” Then I put two or more empty bowls around the filled bowl then begin to pour again on that first bowl and of course it starts to overflow and marbles spill over the other bowls. I tell my students, “You see the way this first bowl is spilling over the other bowls? This is how we can love others. We just let God’s love spill out from us. Imagine, anytime someone goes near us, God’s love spills unto them without us even trying.”

This is my experience with my husband. His love is effortless because it is really God’s love that is overflowing and spilling out to me and to all those who even come near him. What a gift!

This is my prayer and hope for all of us. Hold out this empty sacred space for God to fill it. Let God pour this love that is unceasing, inexhaustible, and overflowing. Let it spill over. Let it spill over to anyone even if they are at a safe distance of 6 ft.

As we enter into a period of silence, I invite you to consider these reflection questions:

- How have I been judging or measuring other people?
- What is preventing me from letting God fill in the empty spaces of my life?

You can also use the reflection questions inside your booklet.