



New every morning.

BY GREG TRAINOR, Catholic Lay Missionary

It has happened again. Like a commercial jingle or a song from the radio that you just can't stop singing, I've got a scripture that keeps echoing in my soul: "His mercy is new every morning." I suppose it is my own paraphrase of the wonderful truth expressed in Lamentations 3:22-23: "The favors of the Lord are not exhausted, his mercies are not spent; They are renewed each morning, so great is his faithfulness."

Perhaps it is all of the hoopla over the New Year and having a new beginning that has me thinking about this. For the Christian, a new beginning is always available. God's mercy is renewed every day, and a new beginning is close at hand. The wonderful truth of this is that God not only provides the forgiveness to wipe the slate clean, but his grace will transform us and make us new. We have more than our own determination and new-found self-discipline to rely upon; we are to open to the grace and power of God that will make us new. This is the hope of the Christian life. This hope of a new life is available to all through conversion: "So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

What a joy it is to know that we can come to God and begin anew each morning. It also can be quite a burden to live without knowing that God will give you a new start. I have ministered to many people on the streets that have been deceived into believing that God will not take them back again. The main reason that they continue in such pitiful conditions is that they need to see that God's mercy is new this day and a new beginning is as near as the opening of their heart. The lie of condemnation blinds their ability to see that their Father in heaven is waiting with open arms as did the father in the parable of the prodigal son.

Mayberry, U.S.S.R.

I remember when we went out to preach the Gospel at the end of our school of evangelization in Siberia. The Bolsheviks had destroyed all but three buildings that the church owned in the diocese that then spanned nine time zones. We had gathered two parish leaders from each of the 31 parishes in the diocese for the School of Christian Life and Evangelization. I taught the final week of the school, the portion on evangelization.

As always, we went out to evangelize at the end of the week. We had rented a hotel in the forest to use for the school. The nearest villages were five kilometers in opposite directions. I used the long afternoon break to walk to each village earlier in the week. One was a series of log cabin homes along a river and another looked more like a tiny Southern town in the U.S. Virtually everyone in both villages worked on the communal farms.

Now, two by two we were going to evangelize. Half of our group went along the river; I went with the other half to the tiny town. As we approached town, Philip (the 11 year old son of one of our translators) ran ahead and interrupted an informal soccer game. He asked all of the children to sit down and gave them each a Gospel booklet in Russian. He shared the Gospel with them and offered to pray with those that wanted to accept Jesus. Just sitting in on our sessions, Philip caught the fire. That year in school, he found his teacher crying. He asked her what was wrong, listened, and then told her that she needed the joy that Jesus can bring. Through his witness, she was baptized in the local parish the next Easter!

I was teamed with Vadim, another one of our translators for the school. My Russian was negligible and I needed to be paired with someone fluent in English. Early that morning, two of the teenaged girls in the program came to me with a request: "We must go with you, Greg. We are too afraid to speak. If we have to go on our own, we will die!" Their circumstance was unique. They weren't sent from a parish to participate in the program. Each of these girls had come separately with their mother for a week of holiday in the hotel; they never had seen each other before that week. Each had felt drawn to our sessions in the auditorium. There they heard the Gospel and accepted Jesus as Savior. Now, before their first official catechism lesson preparing them for Baptism, they were headed to the streets to evangelize.

Now in town, we passed the field where young Philip was talking to his peers. Across the street, a group of men were sitting on the lawn and passing a bottle of vodka (9:30 a.m.). We found our way up a side street to a small house surrounded by a picket fence. It looked quite a bit like a scene from Mayberry on the Andy Griffith Show. We saw an old man on the side porch and entered the fence. The girls

said that they were too frightened, so I asked them to wait in the dirt road and pray for us. I told them: "If God inspires you with something to say, come in and Vadim and I will pray for you as you speak."

Vadim had a long talk with the old man in Russian. I had already told him that if he was the only one that spoke, it would be quite fine with me. After about fifteen minutes of conversation, Vadim looks at me and says: "The old man is O.K." I asked him to explain. He re-counted the man's testimony. The old man had been a Russian soldier in WWII. Like many Siberian soldiers, he fought near Moscow. He had been given a Bible during this time (by an American no less). He read the entire Bible several times, had faith in Christ and was later baptized. The Bible was gone, but his faith was real. I said: "Ask him if there is something that he wants to pray for." The old man said his wife was dying of cancer.

Ready for the grave.

It turned out that his wife was the old woman inside of the screen door, slicing a bucket of mushrooms in the kitchen. It took quite a bit of coaxing to get her to come out on the porch. She would later tell us that we were the first Christians to preach the Gospel in her town since the government closed the Orthodox Church in the town in 1957! Yet, the Jehovah's Witnesses had twice been through their town in that year, and she was convinced that we would charge them for talking to them just as the JW's had tried to sell them their magazines. In her mind, the meter was running when Vadim was talking to the old man, she better not run up the tab any higher. Vadim discovered this and assured her that there was no charge to talk to us!

I told her that we would pray for Jesus to give her a miracle and heal her of cancer, but first I wanted to share the good news of the Gospel and tell her about Jesus of Nazareth, heaven, and the promise of eternal life. The teenaged girls saw the old woman sit on the porch and they braved entry to the yard. They came in and spoke naturally with the woman. My weak Russian recognized the phrase "the love of God" over and over in what they said to her.

The woman's heart was being touched by these girls. I asked Vadim to help me and I shared the kerygma with the old woman, the simple message of the Gospel. I asked if she wanted to accept Jesus as her Savior, and live the new life of a Christian. She adamantly refused. She would point over the back fence to the cemetery and say: "That is what is left for me now!"

She had come home from the hospital to die. She said that there was no heaven for her, God would never forgive her: "The grave is what is for me!" I would encourage her to open and receive God's forgiveness and she would refuse. I asked Vadim to speak to her in Russian, to say whatever God inspired him to say, yet she still refused. I stopped to

pray in tongues, asking God for a leading, for him to divinely reveal to her that forgiveness was available for sins.

I felt led to ask her what she did that was so wrong that she could never be forgiven. She explained that her father went off to fight in the war. Her mother had a lot of children and she was the oldest. Each night her mother would send her out to steal food for the family. She would steal from fields of crops and even crawl through homes to get enough food for the family! She looked at me and said: "I broke God's law so many times, he will never forgive me!"

At that moment, I had a Holy Spirit inspiration. I took out my small New American Bible from my pocket. I found the holy-card-like-picture of the crucifixion. I said, "This is what Jesus did to pay the price for your sin. Can you look at this and tell God the Father, 'That is not enough for my sin?'" I waited, asking the Holy Spirit to give her revelation. She began to sob, saying "It is enough! It is enough!" We lead her in a prayer of conversion (the sinner's prayer). We laid our hands on her and prayed for her to be healed of cancer in Jesus' name. There was no obvious, immediate result to the healing prayer.

Vadim returned the next day to bring them a Bible and make arrangements for a follow-up visit. They wouldn't take the Bible, knowing it was very expensive and didn't want to be billed for it. But they smiled when he insisted, set the Bible down and walked away. I don't know if that lady ever received a physical healing, but I do know that if she had died the night before we arrived it would have been a tragedy. I know that something glorious happened on that porch when she opened her heart to God's mercy and the truth of the Gospel.

Open to God's mercy today.

I have repeated that challenge (to consider the cross and tell the Father that it is not enough) to many who have also expressed such hopelessness, usually junkies or mentally ill people on the streets. It's more than a clever trick; our sin is brought into proper perspective when considered in the light of the passion of Jesus, His death, and the power of His resurrection.

In what area of your life do you need a fresh start? Remember there is no limit to God's grace, mercy, and power. His mercy is abundant even for the things that He has forgiven in the past and now you find yourself in need again. That is precisely why the Scripture tells us that His mercy is "new every morning." Come often and ask for all of the mercy you need. God is pleased to receive you and give you all that you need.



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