The mercy of God heals willing recipients. In today’s readings we hear about the healings which Isaiah, Paul, and Peter all received. I’d like to say a few words about mercy, and make a practical application to our lives.

Mercy. In this Jubilee Year of Mercy, virtually every Catholic newspaper, magazine and journal has countless articles with “mercy” in the title. As a very minor author, I know that if I wanted to publish something twenty years ago, it helped to have the word “saint” in the title. Ten years ago, “angels” served as the buzz word. Now with the wonderful vision of Pope Francis and this Year of Mercy, “mercy” is the hot button word. [Show and tell: this month’s issue of the Western New York Catholic newspaper, this quarter’s issue of Horizon journal for vocation ministry, and Walter Kasper’s recent book on Pope Francis’ Revolution of Tenderness and Love.]

Mercy. The Hebrew word for “mercy” connotes a much richer reality than the English word for mercy. Scholars translate the Hebrew word “hesed” as “eternally enduring undeserved kindness.” The benefactor possesses more power than the recipient, acts with affection, and remains faithful no matter the response of the recipient. We religious pray often Psalm 136 which proclaims, “His love endures forever.” We might easily and rightly say, “His mercy endures forever.” The words are interchangeable. For those of us in the English-speaking world, “love” has become hackneyed and somewhat vacuous. We might replace “love” with “mercy,” which similarly communicates well the essence of God.

In this morning readings we read three accounts of God’s mercy. In the first reading, Isaiah during a vision sees the Lord and angels. Isaiah declares, “Woe is me. ... I am a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the Lord, the King of hosts.” Then an angel touches an ember to Isaiah’s lips, announcing, “Your wickedness is removed, your sin is purged.” God in his mercy heals.

Paul writes to the Corinthians, “I am the least of the apostles ... because I persecuted the church of God.” In his next sentence Paul continues, “but by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective. Indeed, I have toiled harder than all of the other [apostles], not I, however, but the grace of God that is with me.” God in his mercy heals.

The gospel reports that Peter and his partners had been fishing all night and had caught nothing. Jesus shows them where to fish. The fishermen then make a huge haul. Peter perceives the incomparable goodness of Jesus. Peter humbly utters, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” Jesus replies to Peter, “Do not be afraid. From now on, you will be catching men.” God in his mercy heals.
Sisters and lay friends, God in his mercy desires to heal us in the ways that he knows each of us needs. He calls us to serve as consecrated and dedicated witnesses to the Christian life in our particular time and place.

I was intrigued in this morning’s gospel that Jesus removed himself from the land to the water in order to preach. The gospel says the crowd was pressing in on him. I wonder if there might be another explanation. Water is a conductor of sound. For five years, I resided at Michigan while ministering at our Vincentian retreat house. The retreat house faced onto seven mile long Spring Lake. What an extraordinary view! While people would be boating many hundreds of yards from the shoreline, other people on land could hear distinctly everything they said. I used to kid, “Never go to confession while you are in the middle of the lake, everybody on shore will hear you.” I wonder if Jesus preached from the water rather than the land so that people could more easily and therefore more effectively hear him. Jesus wants us to proclaim the good news from the mountain tops, and at lakes in order that we might be as effective as possible.

In this Year of Mercy, we recommit ourselves to the Lord. Confidently we trust in God’s hesed, i.e., his “eternally enduring undeserved kindness.” We present ourselves to the Lord daily so that he might touch our minds and mouths, our hands and hearts so that we too might become more effective witnesses of the Lord in this Year of Mercy.