

ECHOING GOD'S WORD
in
THE CATHOLIC FAITH COMMUNITY
Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time
February 19, 2023

Lectionary Readings:

Leviticus 19:1-2,17-18	God invites his people to holiness and love.
1 Corinthians 3:16-23	Living in humility and harmony gives wisdom.
Matthew 5:38-48	Jesus calls us to forgiveness and non-violence.

Matthew:

Last week, the Lectionary gave us four of the six ‘antitheses’ of Jesus’ teaching: “You have heard that it was said to those of old ... but I say to you....” 1. “‘You shall not kill.’ I say, ‘Avoid anger.’” 2. “‘You shall not commit adultery.’ I say, ‘Do not lust.’” 3. “‘Give a divorce.’ I say, ‘Stay married.’” 4. “‘Do not swear falsely.’ I say, ‘Tell only the truth.’” Today, we hear the two: “‘An eye for an eye.’ I say, ‘Turn the other cheek.’” “‘Love your neighbor.’ I say, ‘Love your enemies.’”

Many of us know that the Jewish Law of Talion, the law limiting the degree of retaliation allowed those under the Covenant, had originally been intended as a very civilizing restraint on the primitive codes that allowed virtually unlimited retaliation for crimes committed against self or against a member of the family. “*Only one eye; not ten,*” as permitted in the Code of Hammurabi. Jesus allows no retaliation at all.

Turn the other cheek: It has been suggested by some interpreters of this passage that masters were allowed to strike a slave only with the back of the hand, thereby striking on the right cheek. Jesus’ command to ‘offer the left cheek as well’ would therefore mean: “Do not treat me like a slave; treat me as an equal. Use your fist and strike as you would someone of equal stature: Strike on the left cheek!” This response would mean that I do not permit anyone to treat me as an inferior being. I require that my dignity be respected. I am not going to retaliate, but I insist that I be treated with honor.

Ancient laws allowed the courts to impose the penalty of ‘taking a man’s shirt or undergarment’ in payment of a debt. It was forbidden to ‘take a man’s cloak or outer garment’ since that was often the only shelter a person had for the cold of the night. Jesus would have us give more than is required in our human interactions. In other words, be generous with other people!

Roman soldiers were allowed to force a civilian to carry their military pack up to one mile. Jesus says, “Your real retaliation will be to do more than what is required!”

Matthew is going beyond what Jewish law actually says when he quotes Leviticus: “Love your countryman; hate the foreigner.” The Law required that love be given to people of the Covenant. Surely, there was no law requiring that enemies be hated. Jesus’ teaching goes far beyond the Law. It is not a reversal of the Law.

Leviticus asked that people of the Covenant imitate the *holiness* of God. Jesus does the same in his teaching, but he becomes more specific: Imitate also the *generosity* of God.

The code of non-violent response to violence requires a great deal of courage. It comes only in response to prayer. Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., came to that response only after years of spiritual discipline and a maturity of heart born in great suffering. Jesus spent many nights in

prayer before he forgave his executioners. His actions and his teachings come from a tested soul, a heart that had borne much pain. The Church community will only come to that spiritual maturity in 'prayer and fasting.'

Leviticus:

Jewish religious literature contains many elements that have been woven together, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to form the holy books that have come to be recognized as Scripture. The priests of the Jerusalem Temple contributed a strand that is represented in books ranging from Genesis to Joshua. The Book of Leviticus is almost all made up of this "priestly" material. The main concern is 'holiness' or a 'right relationship with God.' Holiness does not come from the performance of rituals but is initiated by God as God's gift and endowment to his people. "*You are holy because you belong to God who is holy.*"

Corinthians:

The Temple as sign of God's presence in the world would soon be no more. Paul assumes that the presence of God has already passed into the lives of those who have been reborn into Christ. That is where holiness resides now. We would put it this way today: Jesus Christ is the sacrament of God's presence in the world; the Church is the sacrament of Christ's presence here and now. We ourselves are holy because we are in Christ. Paul will later develop this teaching to show that our very bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and that our moral purity must be motivated by the fact that we are 'members of Christ.'

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In what practical ways are you challenged by the teachings of Jesus on generosity and love? Have you ever felt the call to forgive and to love someone who has done you harm? Are there some relatives or family members whom you find difficult to love? What would it take for you to be able to love as Jesus did? What would it cost you? What would you have to give up?

2. Discuss the ways in which Jesus asks his disciples to practice humility and meekness. How is that different from allowing others to abuse us? Does Jesus require that we become "doormats" and allow everyone to walk all over us? Does Christian humility oblige us to slip into low self-esteem? How can we preserve our dignity as human beings and as children of God and still "turn the other cheek"?

3. What are the ways in which the love of God and of neighbor will "be perfected" in us as in the heavenly Father? Discuss what that means. What are the processes by which we become like God? Do we recognize that God has already taken the initiative in that regard by inviting us into fellowship with Jesus Christ through baptism?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Seek out one person whom you have not yet forgiven. Ask that person to pray for you that you may be able to forgive. Move beyond the victim role to the role of empowerment and strength and maturity through forgiveness.

PRAYER

**With all my heart, I praise the Lord,
and with all that I am, I praise his holy name.**

**With all my heart, I praise the Lord.
I will never forget how kind he has been!**

(Psalm 103)

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

The Christian faith in its most authentic expression finds its greatest challenge in the call to love one's enemies. This issue may very well be the litmus test, the deciding factor, that will separate true Christianity from secular models of religion. The ability to love those who do not love us, the willingness to love those who even do us harm, that is what makes our practice of the Christian faith real or make-believe.

The most benign of rational philosophies would have us stop short of that awesome step whereby we would forgive the ones who have hurt us or hurt our loved ones. Even if we could be persuaded to forgive for the sake of peace and harmony, how could we ever be drawn to go so far as to love the criminal, to love the murderer, the rapist, the abuser of our children? The ultimate test of our commitment to Jesus Christ and to his Gospel is that we ask God to enable us to love those who do us harm.

By our own energies, to do so may very well be impossible. What motive could we possibly have among all the earthly motives? The world would see us as weak and cowardly if we were to forgive and to love those who do not deserve it. In a dog-eat-dog environment, we fear that we may be taken advantage of if we appear to be weak and meek. The wisdom of the streets says that we should hit first before we get hit. The prevailing strategy today seems to be that we counter violence with violence -- death penalty and all.

We can follow no other model than Jesus himself if we choose to be called his disciples. As followers of Christ, we must assume his stance toward violence, toward retaliation, toward dealing with enemies. He forgave his own executioners. He prayed to his Father for those who had crucified him. He asked Peter to put away the sword.

The Church does not assume that we can all forgive and love spontaneously. The tradition recognizes that love of enemies is a gift of the Holy Spirit that we must learn to appropriate, to integrate into our daily responses and behaviors. It is a virtue that comes from prayer and from a fuller identification with Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. For some of us, it may take a lifetime to come to that serenity that makes it possible for us to love those who do not love us.

(See **The Catechism: # 1825**)

© 2017 by Rev. Clement D. Thibodeau. All rights reserved.