

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

SIRACH 15:15-20; 1 CORINTHIANS 2:6-10; MATTHEW 5:17-37

In the gospel, Jesus says: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subjected to judgment.’ Again, anyone who says to a brother, ‘RAQA,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of Gehenna.

Jesus turned his audience’s attention to the Jewish court system which they all knew. The lowest court was found in villages throughout Judea and Galilee, and handled non-capital cases that covered a wide range of offenses.

A higher court, the Sanhedrin, took care of more serious cases regarding anger.

The first step to prevent anger from leading to a more serious crime was revealed when Jesus taught -- “Anyone who says to a brother, ‘RAQA,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin.” This is more serious than just being angry, because it is to be tried by a higher court.

(STORY) There was a Rabbi named Eleazar who was coming from the house of his teacher. He was riding leisurely on his ass by the riverside feeling happy and elated because he had studied much Torah. There chanced to meet him an exceedingly ugly man who greeted him, ‘Peace be upon you, Sir.’ He, however, did not return his salutation but instead said to him, ‘RAQA (you useless and empty thing), how ugly you are. Are all your fellow citizens as ugly as you are?’ The man replied: ‘I do not know, but go and tell the craftsman who made me, “How ugly is the vessel which you have made.’

When Eleazar realized that he had done wrong he dismounted from the ass and prostrated himself before the man and said to him, ‘I submit myself to you, and forgive me.’ The man replied: ‘I will not forgive you until you go to the craftsman who made me and say to him, ‘How ugly is the vessel which you have made”.’

RAQA means "useless, empty and of no value." The point made in this story is that everyone is made in the image of God, so how could a learned man like the rabbi call anyone RAQA? Jesus teaches us that any person we may become angry with is also made in the image of God. *Do not say that the person we are angry with is useless and of no value -- if we do, we should be tried by the Sanhedrin!*

Jesus tells us that there is an even more serious crime that an angry person can commit - calling the person a “fool.” A ‘fool’ is defined as: *“A person lacking in judgment or prudence; a harmlessly deranged person or one lacking in common powers of understanding.”*

Calling a person RAQA out of anger *denied that the other person is made "in the image of God."* Calling a person a "fool" in Jesus' time was to say that *the person had denied the existence of God.*

If we are angry with someone because of something they have done then we should acknowledge our feelings, confront the situation and seek reconciliation.

We often think that anger itself is wrong. We either suppress it or brood over it. Suppression is unhealthy; it denies the feeling pushing it into the unconscious so as to pretend it is not there. Then, much later it reappears in an inappropriate way.

Brooding is just as unhealthy, when we brood we nurse the anger; we feed it and keep it to ourselves. The whole thing grows out of all proportion and leaves us feeling bitter hatred.

There are appropriate expressions of anger and inappropriate expressions of it. It is how we handle our anger that becomes moral and this can be either good or bad.

Learning to handle anger is one of the most important lessons in life, and it has real consequences for our mental and spiritual well-being. Suppressing anger is the road to an overdeveloped sense of guilt.

SEPARATE POINT:

Sean White – US snowboarder champion. Withdrew from a slopestyle event to concentrate on the half pipe and the full pipe to try at a 3-time Olympic win. (ended in failure). Too late for US to put someone else in Sean's place on slopestyle. Brought criticism from teammates.

Evgeni Plushenko – Russian ice skater, 31 years old. Withdrew from completion and retired because of a back injury suffered in early stages of completion. Was immediately called out as an invalid by a government minister because of it...and the public seemed to have disowned him.

The Olympic creed? *"The important thing in life is not the triumph, but the fight; the essential thing is not to have won, but to have fought well."*

The Olympic motto? Made up of three Latin words: Citius - Altius - Fortius. These words mean Faster - Higher - Stronger.

The values of Olympism? Excellence, friendship and respect. They constitute the foundation on which the Olympic Movement builds its activities to promote sport, culture and education with a view to building a better world.

Given the spirit of the Olympics, I was a little taken aback by the anger let loose by some on the social media and the internet regarding these two athletes. White and Plushenko were highly criticized by teammates and others when (instead) they should have been supported by those same people for their efforts. Given the values of **Olympism**, their detractors fell far short of **respect** for the athletes. The social media has become a thing of good as bad as well as good.

Our Olympic athletes want to perform at the peak of their abilities. They want to get up and do the hard work of building their bodies day after day after day. They want to keep moving, strengthening, developing the gifts they have been given. They are all highly motivated.

Take away all the other variables, and it comes down to this: what makes an Olympic champion is a matter of will. It's their choice. We aren't all Olympic material, but their lives tell us: we are what we choose to be.

The readings are about the choices we face—how we are called to do what is right, what is just, what follows God's law—and how we often choose not to.

The choice is ours. The choice is ours - to follow God's law, or our own whims. The choice is ours - to obey the commandments, or follow our own desires.

Jesus makes the compelling point that all these greater sins begin with some lesser sin, and they all have their roots in the human heart. They start with what we choose.

Most sins begin as an idea, a thought, a desire. It's the choice to do something easy or quick or pleasurable and know that you won't get caught. It starts with that faint inkling that you can get away with something—and then, to try it.

It begins with a choice.

We are being reminded that God isn't the one who seals our fate.

We do it to ourselves.

We do it by our choices.

One of the blessings of our humanity, something that goes back to the very dawn of time and the first day humankind walked through Eden, is that God gives us that choice. God gives us free will.

But what are we doing with it? More to the point—from what Jesus says in the gospel—what are we *thinking* of doing with it?

Do we desire heaven enough to do the hard work that salvation entails? Do we get up every morning craving to be our best, striving to become saints? Do we feel we owe it to ourselves, and to God?

One of the lessons of life is that excellence takes effort. That is especially true for each of us in our lives as Catholic Christians.

That means stopping the smaller sins before they become greater ones.

But that also means sacrifice. It means caring for others no one else cares about: loving the unlovable, showing mercy to those who seem merciless, forgiving those who have done what we think is unforgivable.

It means following the example of Christ, all the way to Calvary.

It means striving to live the gospel more fully, and doing it with fidelity and with joy, so that we can fulfill God's dream for us.

This is the beautiful, difficult, challenging work of a lifetime. And we are never too old to do it.

These athletes became champions because they wanted to. They wanted to fulfill their potential. They didn't give up or give in. Of course, we can't all be Olympic champions. We don't all have resilient bodies and hardy genes. But we have a choice.

All of us, if we choose, can become saints.

They are motivated to become the best they can be. Are we?
(with excerpts from Deacon Greg Kandra & Jim Myers)

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