

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Feb 19, 2017
(Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18; 1 Corinthians 3:16-23; Matthew 5:38-48)

Late one night, a truck driver pulled into a roadside café for a little something to eat after a long, tiring day on the road. As he was eating, three nasty-looking motorcyclists noisily strutted in and made their way to the bar. For some unknown reason, they gravitated toward the truck driver. One poured a little salt on his head, another knocked his pie on the floor and the third managed to knock the trucker's coffee off the counter and onto the man's lap. The trucker got up and said nothing, paid his bill and made his exit.

"That dude wasn't much of a fighter" sneered one of the bikers.

The waiter peered out the window onto the dark parking lot and answered, "He's not much of a driver either. He just ran over three motorcycles."

Now sometimes (if we are honest) it brings a smile to our hearts to see nasty people get paid back for their nastiness. But, Jesus gives us a different way to look at things in today's gospel...a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount (as Fr Tom mentioned last week)..we heard Jesus list several of the commandments with the phrase, "you have heard it said..." and then give us his interpretation of how we were to observe them with the words, "but I say to you..."

The gospel continues this pattern with two other commandments – the first is the law of 'talion' - the English word meaning a retaliation authorized by law; the punishment corresponds in kind and degree to the injury (no more – no less)...'eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth.' The second is the law about love of neighbor.

In Leviticus, God tells Moses and the people of Israel to be Holy. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells us that we are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in us. Because we are God's dwelling place, we're expected to live holy lives, and in the Gospel, Jesus tells us how to do that.

Jesus' message is bold and is contrary to the way most people of his time thought. It's a no longer a call to look at justice as, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," but to passivity in conflicts, generosity to those who in need, and to love our enemies.

If we wanted to find the most challenging, difficult, or confounding passage in the gospels, this just might be it. It is also the most fundamentally Christian – because it calls on each of us to be the most like Christ. More than that, it calls on us to be "perfect, like the Father is perfect."

It's a tall order. Look at what it entails - turning the other cheek; giving away your cloak; and the most radical point of all - loving your enemies and praying for your persecutors.

Consider all the people who have hurt us. Those who have lied to us; stabbed us in the back. Remember the ones who spread vicious rumors about us that were patently untrue. Those who gossiped about us, or judged us unfairly.

Consider the friend that we trusted, who betrayed us. The co-worker who broke a confidence. Someone whose name we'd rather forget who wounded us - disrespected us - or took advantage of us or even abused us. Look back on all the people in our lives who have left bruises and scars, with a word or a look or a touch.

Now, imagine doing what Jesus commands...love them; pray for their good; pray that grace will come into their lives; pray that their eyes may be opened, and their hearts may be healed. Because the chances are, if someone has hurt us or persecuted us...it's probably because someone once did the same to them.

It is a vicious cycle. And that fundamental truth of our humanity may be one reason why Jesus "Stop. Enough. Break the cycle. Let it go."

Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors. I know I sometimes have a hard time with it. Some close friends hurt me once, very deeply. I spent a lot of nights lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, crying about the loss and imagining ways of getting even.

But those were dark thoughts - ultimately self-destructive thoughts. Jesus himself knows that and he knows I can do better. He knows I can aim higher. Be perfect, he says, just as our heavenly Father is perfect.

Jesus taught us what he meant when, surrounded by his enemies, he hung on a cross as they gambled for his clothes and waited for him to die. And in that moment, Jesus prayed: "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do."

Here is love beyond measure: a prayer for a broken and unknowing world. At one time or another, each of us has been suspended on our own cross, feeling helpless, or hopeless, facing cruelty or injustice.

When was the last time any we prayed for someone we didn't like? If we take a hard look at this gospel, and then take a hard look at our lives, it's not an unreasonable question to ask.

I'm not very good at it... I have a long list of people ahead of these that I regularly pray for – and I figure I'll get to these others eventually. I have friends who are sick with cancer, and people who have asked me to pray for loved ones who are out of work or facing some sort of health issue or other crisis. The enemies are further down my list.

But as Jesus reminds us: it's not hard to love those who love us – or to pray for those who matter to us. We are called to do something more – to love those who hate us, and to pray for those who attack us.

Today, as we approach the altar to receive the body of Christ, pray for the grace to love the unlovable, to forgive the unforgivable, and to remember in prayer those you'd rather forget.

I have a long way to go to achieve that end. But **only in beginning** that journey toward love, only then can we dare to approach the perfection Jesus spoke of – one we can never fully attain, but to which we all have to strive, day by day, prayer by prayer. Strive to be perfect...Jesus showed us the way.

How could any of us not try to follow?

Deacon Greg Cecere

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(with excerpts from Father Killian Loch, O.S.B. & Deacon Greg Kandra)