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One day God told Moses to assemble the entire community of Israel for an important message. So Moses did as he was told and God said: “Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.” What on earth did that mean? It seems redundant to call God holy; what else could God be? The people sought holiness by obeying God’s laws, but how could that make them holy like God? Did God obey the laws? God had no spouse or parent, nobody to whom to offer sacrifice, and all plants and animals belong to God so neither stealing nor jealousy can apply. How does one live so as to be holy like God?

Jesus issued essentially this same command at the end of today’s Gospel, except that Jesus used the word “perfect” instead of “holy.” It sounds like an impossible demand. How can we be like God? The minute we ask that question, we hear an echo of the first chapter of Genesis: “God created humankind in the divine image.” We must have some potential! Perhaps our major problem has been with our definition of holiness or godly perfection.

If we work backwards in today’s Gospel we hear about God’s unprejudiced treatment of the just and the unjust, those well-known for their goodness and those known for anything but love of God or others. The measure of God’s holiness or perfection seems to be the way God sends sun and rain to everybody. That must be what Jesus

meant when he said: “Love your enemies that you may be children of your heavenly father.” And lest that be left simply as pious theory, he gave three practical, surprising and laughter-inducing examples of just what that looks like in practice.

Before we go to the examples, we need to explore the translation that says “offer no resistance to one who is evil.” When did Jesus let evil pass untrammelled? A better translation of that statement is “Do not react with hostility to one who is evil.” That’s an entirely different thing from not resisting evil. So the practical question is how to resist without hostility.

Jesus suggests that when somebody slaps you, you should turn the other cheek. The play in this bit of wisdom comes with the carefully chosen word “slap.” Jesus didn’t say “When your spouse beats you,” or “When the gang bullies you again,” instead, he said, “When somebody slaps you.” A slap is meant to demean rather than to draw blood. A slap doesn’t invite a fist fight; it’s a put-down, a power play in the social hierarchy. Note too that the slap Matthew portrays was backhanded (right hand to right cheek). Jesus was describing something intended to put the victim in his or her place rather than to incapacitate her or him. Turning the other cheek changed the game by having the victim say, “Hit me with integrity and then we’ll see.” Surely a few of the audience gasped as they pictured a browbeaten servant finally standing up like that to an arrogant overlord.

So too with walking the extra mile. A Roman soldier could force a local resident to carry his pack, but for only one mile. The offer to go a second mile robbed the uniformed bully of the initiative and put him in danger of being reported for going beyond the limits. By now Jesus’ audience was beginning to chuckle at the image of a Roman soldier pleading to get his pack back from a clever, audacious, pacifist rebel.

In the third example the power imbalance was economic. A poor person had borrowed money and all he had as collateral was his tunic, the outer garment that also served as his blanket at night. If the lender wanted to refuse to return the tunic until the loan was paid, he could get a group of collaborators to make the judgment on his behalf. The poor debtor then had no recourse except to make a prophetic point of the absolutely unadorned fact that such a law left some naked while others ended up possessing a grimy inner garment — laundry they didn’t need and hardly wanted to touch.

What does God's holiness look like? It looks like a never-ending outreach to rebellious humanity, an ongoing invitation to communion, the incarnation of love, no matter the cost. It looks like a person who approaches an oppressor with an attitude that says "You, no we can be better than that!" It looks like Oscar Romero and Dorothy Day, Mother Theresa and the little kid who forgives his brother who when tackled get his leg broken.

Moses said "Be holy!" Jesus said "Be perfect," and with his stories he taught that it is not only possible, but a lot more fun than other options.

LEVITICUS 19:1-2, 17-18

"Thus says the Lord: 'Be holy for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.' " On one level, there's a socio/psychological theory underneath the idea that we tend to become like whatever god we worship. As human beings we naturally imitate what we admire. We see what others acclaim as desirable and suddenly we can't wait to have it for ourselves. It's as if there's a yawning emptiness in us, a hunger ever seeking satisfaction that impels us to look outside ourselves for more. Thus we wear our team's colors and buy the car that bespeaks our values, be they for the flashy or the ostentatiously ecologically responsible. This is the tendency that makes us prone to idolatry. We shouldn't think of idolatry just as some ancient pagan ritual of bowing down before a totem, but recognize that every choice we make says something about our ultimate values, in other words, about what we worship. The Latin American bishops have spoken out vehemently against the contemporary "idols of power, wealth and fleeting pleasure" which have become "the decisive criterion in social organization" (*Aparecida* #387). We can recognize what we truly worship not so much by where we might go to church but rather by noting on what we spend our energy and our money. We know what has become holy to us by what makes us cheer, by what we strive to be and do.

Pope Francis commented on the "universal call to holiness" saying, "We are all called to become saints! So often, we are tempted to think that holiness is granted only to those who ... devote [their lives] to prayer. But it is not so! Some people think that holiness is closing your eyes and putting on a pious face ... No! That is not holiness! Holiness is something greater, more profound that God gifts us." He went on to say, "When the Lord calls us to be saints, he does not call us to something hard or sad ... Not at all! It is an invitation to share His joy, to live and offer every

moment of our lives with joy, at the same time making it a gift of love for the people around us” (Vatican Radio, 11/19/2014).

That is Pope Francis’ commentary on the Leviticus injunction to imitate God’s holiness. In very simple language he summarizes what Jewish and Christian biblical scholars have said about this passage. They will speak of God’s holiness as God’s love, God’s unrelenting coming to humanity with the invitation to participate in Trinitarian love. Whether we use Moses, Francis or the scholars, the end result is the same: “Be holy, for I the Lord, your God, am holy,” is an invitation to joy.

1 CORINTHIANS 3:16-23

There’s an interesting interplay between our reading from Leviticus and this selection from First Corinthians. Moses called the entire community together to demand that they be holy as God is holy. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul addresses the entire community as the temple of God. We should make no mistake here: Paul is speaking in the second person plural. The “you” called the temple and dwelling place of God’s spirit is the community, not individuals. While this way of speaking normally passes right by us as one more pious religious phrase, it had a good dose of shock value in Paul’s day. Paul wrote this letter around the year 56 when the Temple in Jerusalem still stood as the center of Jewish worship. The Temple was considered the focal point of God’s presence on earth (Psalm 48): the holy place in the holy city in God’s holy land. For a Jew like Paul to refer to the Christian community as the temple of God was something of a combination of blasphemy and a call to the people to fulfill the deepest meaning of their vocation. Paul was telling the Corinthians (and us) that if the world is to encounter God it will not happen in special buildings or on holy mountains, but in an encounter with God’s own people.

Whatever Paul might think of how the church has developed in the 20 centuries since he wrote, he would surely call us to a reemphasis on the presence of the Spirit God in the community. Paul would hardly be against our coming together for liturgy in a beautiful church — so long as it passes the test of authenticity he expounds later (1 Corinthians 11:17-33). But Paul would surely question our ingrained independence combined with our tendency to consider certain places, individuals and even things as “holy” while we miss the real presence of God in community.

The penchant for considering particular places as holy has developed in Christianity, and particularly in Catholicism. The early Christians worshipped in homes that otherwise housed the daily activities of the family. As Christianity became legalized in the fourth century, it was possible to build great church buildings that far outshone the house church or even small buildings set apart for communal worship. The Eucharistic bread was first reserved for distribution to the sick and eventually as a focus of private prayer, so that the building was more than a meeting place. In the 13th century Francis of Assisi promoted and popularized Eucharistic adoration and the practice spread through the ensuing centuries. Abuses eventually crept into liturgical practice and the Eucharistic presence was considered to have quasi-magical powers; awe-filled exaltation of the consecrated host replaced participation and communion — a misplaced emphasis addressed by the Council of Trent, Pius X and Vatican II.

If we take Paul seriously about the community being God's temple, we will be challenged to a broader, deeper and more demanding understanding of Christ's presence in our world. This can increase our devotion even as it calls us to recognize the Spirit among us and to be the presence we celebrate in our Eucharist.

MATTHEW 5:17-37

Today's Gospel brings us the sayings of Jesus that are probably most vulnerable to misinterpretation and disastrous results. How many times have abused people been told to turn the other cheek? How many times have ideas from this selection been used to stop protests against injustice? How has the fatalism of the "resistance is futile" attitude become a mortal danger not just to humanity, but to the earth itself?

To grapple with this section of the Sermon on the Mount we need to understand what Jesus taught about the relationships that characterize the kingdom of heaven. Preceding today's reading, Jesus talked about in-house affairs, relationship with a brother, a husband or colleagues. Now he describes how the blessed participants in the kingdom of heaven can deal with their adversaries.

As before, Jesus introduced his teaching with "You have heard ..." and then quoted an ancient guideline designed to break cycles of increasing violence. "An eye for an eye" assured that whether the person offended was a king or peasant, no more could be exacted from the offender than the loss he had caused. That was strict justice. But, as Gandhi pointed out, while that might have stopped violence from

snowballing, it also created a lot of blindness. Jesus wanted his followers to see things differently.

Jesus wanted his followers to circumvent the spirals of hostility in the world, thus he taught them how to respond in a way that decreases antagonism and increases humanity. The “lex talionis,” an eye for an eye, recognized objective equality in terms of damage. The alternative Jesus proposed personalized the interaction. In his examples the injured party who refuses to be treated as an inferior human being becomes the greater in terms of humanity, simultaneously inviting the other into a more human milieu. That sounds a bit like “The last shall be first,” and it also presages how Jesus would respond to his own arrest, saying that those who live by the sword will die by it.

Jesus showed the powerlessness of brutality by proving that life prevails: he rose from the dead and the cross became a symbol of life. But as Paul admits, his message seems foolish to the world.

Nevertheless, from the time of Moses on, God has called a people to be holy, which ultimately means to be caught up in and by love. Jesus’ message in today’s Gospel is that we were made for more than pettiness and futility, and that no power on earth can demean us to the point of erasing our humanity. Jesus’ teachings about human relations described the interactions that characterize the kingdom of heaven. As in the earlier part of this discourse, these are wisdom sayings, not juridical pronouncements. They present a design for living with specific examples that can be applied to other situations as well. What underlies the whole is a profoundly reverential approach to relationships, to our dealings with those with whom we share community or family and those with whom we deal in day to day situations. The real subject of Jesus’ teaching here is about the heart we put into every human interaction.

Planning: 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

This Sunday and next Sunday offer a dual focus that could easily set the tone for Lent this year. Today’s readings call us to grow in our ability to love. The first reading will sound to some like a passage from the Gospels as it commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves, but it comes from Leviticus in the Hebrew Scriptures. The psalm reminds us that God’s love is revealed in God’s kindness and mercy toward us. The

second reading does not use the word love, but it speaks of the divine indwelling that communicates God's love to us and enables us to love others. The Gospel poses the biggest challenge as Jesus commands us to embrace those who would do us harm: "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father."

There are perhaps few among us who manage to love so widely and so generously as to love even our enemies, but Jesus' words stand as a constant challenge to continue to grow in our ability to love as God loves. This is the central commandment of Jesus, to love God and to love our neighbor. Furthermore, the teaching of Jesus makes it clear that our neighbor must include everyone, even those who hurt us and sin against us.

If Lent is supposed to draw us deeper into God's life, then it must draw us into deeper loving. When the first reading calls us to be holy as God is holy, it goes on to command love of neighbor. That's what holiness entails.

There is much potential for misunderstanding in a similar line in the Gospel. Jesus tells us to "be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect." That could be misunderstood to command the impossible, since none of us humans are perfect. If we remember that God is love, then being perfect like God is to love as God loves. Luke translates the same command as to "be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

In the preaching and prayers this weekend, we might focus on the different circles of loving to which we are called: family and friends, neighbors and fellow worshippers, people of other races and ethnic groups, citizens of other nations, and even those we call our enemies. Planners could compose a whole set of petitions for the intercessions, guiding the assembly to pray for the ability to love in ever widening circles.

There have been various stories in the news in recent years about people forgiving those who hurt them or their families. Search the web and recount one of those in the bulletin this week to help people see that this can happen in real life.

Prayers: 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Today's readings make even more difficult demands on us regarding our behavior as Christians. We live in a culture where there is so much rhetoric about protecting oneself and one's property, about guns and gated communities. How do we reconcile this with Jesus' call to turn the other cheek and love one's enemy? What does it take to embrace these teachings, which many of us — quite honestly — find foolish?

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you call us to love our enemies: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you call us to change our behavior: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you challenge us to be perfect: Lord, have mercy

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray that we may someday live in a world where hate and revenge will no longer exist.

Minister For all Christians who struggle with the challenge of loving one's enemy...we pray,

- For peacemakers, negotiators and all who work to promote peace and reconciliation between warring nations...we pray,
- For those who promote retribution, revenge or hatred toward others who are different...we pray,
- For refugees who are forced to flee their homes and for all whose enemies inflict violence...we pray,
- For the courage to follow the example of those such as Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Malala Yousafzai and Dorothy Day in promoting peace among enemies...we pray,
- For parents, teachers, counselors and all who cultivate children into becoming peacemakers...we pray,
- As we celebrate Presidents' Day, for the wisdom and integrity of our new president and our national leaders...we pray,
- For all in our community who are sick or in any kind of need; and for those who have died...(names)...we pray,

Presider God of mercy, Jesus has challenged us to live in ways that stretch us beyond where we are. Give us the courage to follow the example of peacemakers who loved their enemies. Remind us that all are our brothers and sisters, no matter

how they treat us. We seek to be like Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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