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February 15, 2020

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Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

[February 16, 2020](#)

Sirach 15:15-20

Psalms 119

1 Corinthians 2:6-10

Matthew 5:17-37

St. Joseph Sr. Mary Anselm "Kitty" O'Brien opened her autobiography with the story of an exciting ride in a "motorcar" with four friends. The year was 1914. At 18, she thought she was the envy of every girl in Indianapolis as she and four boys went to a soda shop and rode around town. That feeling lasted until they arrived at her house, where her father stood like a magistrate on the front porch.

"Boy, is he mad," said she.

The youngest of the four brothers asked, "Why? Aren't Catholics allowed to eat ice cream on Thursdays?"

His elder brother replied, "That's meat on Fridays, dummy!"

Kitty O'Brien's father was aggravated because she had been gallivanting in public with four Protestant boys in "that infernal machine." He had never made a rule against it because, until that day, the possibility of her riding around town in an automobile had never crossed his mind. Times change.

In today's Gospel, Jesus acts like a new Moses and interprets the law for his times. Some folks regard law as an unchanging, self-explanatory end in itself: "Know the law, obey it, and nobody can fault you." For Jesus, the law is more like a road sign. It points toward a destination, but isn't an end in itself.

As St. Paul pointed out in Romans 7:7-25, too much attention to the law leads us into self-absorption rather than toward the loving relationships that are the purpose of human life. Valuing the law for its own sake distorts its very meaning. Jesus teaches

us that aiming at the goal of the law unlocks its life-giving potential.

In today's Gospel, Jesus makes a statement about anger. Is he telling us that we're never to get irritated? If that's the case, we can turn the tables and ask, "Yeah, well what about that scandalous scene with the merchants in the Temple? Or the day your voice went way above the normal register while you called the Pharisees blind guides and hypocrites? And the poor accursed fig tree?"

A look at Jesus' life leads us to question whether he really meant we should never get angry. First, let's check our translation. Our translators used "anger" to interpret the Greek word *orgizo*. Old English Bibles designated that as *wroth* or *wrathful*. The word *orgizo* takes irritation to the nth degree: It's full-barreled fury; it's the madness that impels someone to wreak wrathful revenge.

Jesus' word for anger refers to an irrational dynamic that will not rest until others have been made to pay for their offense. There is a big difference between expressing frustration or irritation and allowing self-righteous passion to turn all our energy into getting even!

Regarding Jesus' next instruction, there's not a lot of chance I'll call my brother *Raqa* — at least not until I know what it means. (I have been known to use epithets like "idiot" when I was sure they were deserved.) Just for the sake of clarity, *Raqa* denotes an infidel. According to Scripture scholar Silvano Fausti, using that word is a way of "Satanizing" someone else. Calling someone a fool is the same to a much milder degree.

I can justify the destruction of a satanic *Raqa*; I simply write off fools. But ultimately, I make them both as good as dead to me. Denigrating them defends me against any influence they might have on me.

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Jesus caps this teaching off telling us not to come to church while someone is angry with us: There's no room in the Temple for emotions that set us against one another. He's teaching that we should not only be humble enough to desire the best for our adversaries, but also reach out to those who feel we have offended them. Although we have no control over another's feelings, Jesus tells us that we must do what we can to create reconciliation in our social world before we think we have something to

offer God.

Kitty O'Brien's dad had made no rule against riding through town in a car. The possibility never occurred to him. But he had taught his family the rules and the values they were meant to preserve even as the times changed. Jesus calls us to look at the purpose, the values, not the letter of the law. Only thus can we apply it to changing times.

Our computers never make a mistake because they're programmed for flawless obedience. That makes them very dangerous in situations that require prudence. Understanding and fulfilling the purpose of the law differentiates us from robots. Only human beings can interact in a way that leads all parties concerned to become more human. When it comes to the law, that's the point!

[St. Joseph Sr. Mary M. McGlone is currently serving on the congregational leadership team of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet.]

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A version of this story appeared in the **Feb 7-20, 2020** print issue under the headline: The point of the law.