Spirituality
Scripture for Life



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Have you noticed how, after years of being together, some married couples actually begin to resemble one another? It's not that they necessarily look alike, but they have gradually conformed to one another — or, better said, they have engaged in a process of mutual co-formation. The same happens to good friends.

We see the shadow side of this phenomenon when "trendsetters" set standards for dress, vocabulary or behavior. We humans are natural mimics — we assume the gestures actions and attitudes of those we admire.

No wonder our creator instructed Moses to tell the Israelites, "Be holy, for I am holy." If we are going to mimic, we can’t go wrong with God as our model. That is, unless we misinterpret divine holiness. Our image of God will determine not only our concept of holiness, but also our sense of justice and of what it means to love and live a good life.

As today's Scriptures explore sanctity, what is surprising is that while speaking of holiness, they hardly mention prayer or sacrifice. They emphasize relationships. Our selection from Leviticus describes holiness as an attitude of heart. We encounter holiness in people who have learned to free themselves from attitudes that reject and judge others.

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 19, 2023

Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18
Psalm 103
1 Corinthians 3:16-23
Matthew 5:38-48

It's not that we have to agree with what another says or does; rather, we need to avoid responding to wickedness by mirroring it with anger or grudges, or the hope that God will wreak vengeance on evildoers. No, as the psalm says, God is kind and merciful, never cherishing the memory of our wrongdoing.

This leads us to the Gospel, a continuation of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Now we hear one of the most dangerously misinterpreted teachings of the entire New Testament. Where our translation says, "Offer no resistance to one who is evil," theologian Walter Wink tells us that the original says something more like, "Do not counter evil in kind." That actually restates the Leviticus injunction that although we may need to reprove others, we should not incur sin because of them.

In case that was not clear enough, Jesus unfurled his ironic sense of humor to offer practical examples that have been misinterpreted for centuries.

His teaching about turning the other cheek is quite specific. According to Matthew, Jesus said, if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other. Far from a call to succumb to abuse, Jesus is talking to a right-handed society in which the only way to strike a person on the right cheek was a backhanded slap — a gesture that’s more demeaning than physically harmful.

Jesus was really saying, "Don't let anyone slap you as if you were beneath them. Turn the other cheek to say, I am your equal and more because I will not lower myself to your standard."

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The other two examples follow suit. The only person who would go to law over a tunic was a lender whose client was so poor that he/she had nothing except their outer garment to offer as collateral. Although Exodus 22:25-25 demands that the lender return the tunic at night because it served as the poor person’s blanket, the wealthy could call for a judgment against the debtor. Then, the debtor without recourse could do no more than strip off his/her inner garment, to show the world how a justice system leaves the poor naked while awarding the rich.

Finally, Roman soldiers could force citizens of an occupied country carry their pack for exactly 1 mile and no more. When the conscript offers to carry it further, the bully finds himself in the embarrassing position of pleading that the favor not be

done, lest he be severely punished for abuse.

Each of these describes a clever way to love the enemy. Instead of fighting back on evil’s terms, Jesus called his followers to maintain their dignity in the face of injustice and invite their oppressors to become more human. Blessed are we to have seen examples of such love in people like Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

Jesus ended this part of his preaching saying, "Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect." That restates God’s word through Moses, "Be holy, for I your God am holy." With this, we get a glimpse of how God’s holiness in action is both creative and redemptive. Jesus' examples of relational holiness came from his day-to-day experience. Our challenge is to imitate their cleverness in our own time and circumstances.

Such creative holiness in action does not come to us naturally. First, we must continually contemplate his ways so that we can gradually conform to his example. Then, with the help of his Spirit, we too can learn to practice creative love of our enemies.