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Being holy as who we are

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

A few weeks ago, you remember we started this series of gospel lessons with Jesus calling together his first disciples and then, with them, beginning to proclaim his message, the good news, "The reign of God is at hand."

Then he goes on to tell them, "You must change your lives."

If the reign of God is to happen in my life, I have to begin to live differently. That's what Jesus was telling his disciples and for the last few Sundays, Jesus has been giving us more specific direction on how we must change our lives.

Today we come to probably what we think of as the most challenging, the most radical part of this Sermon on the Mount, this instruction that Jesus gives to us, the part about not returning evil for evil, the part about "turning the other cheek" and a tooth for a tooth, and even beyond these things what seems most radical -- love your enemies.

Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18

Jesus, in the very beginning of this part of the passage, instructs us that we must be perfect as God is perfect. That is what will happen if we really begin to live the Sermon in the Mount.

Psalm 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13

It's what we learn in our lesson today: we must be holy as God is holy. This may seem way beyond us, to be perfect as God is perfect, or to be holy as God is holy.

Matt 5:38-48

The first thing that Jesus instructs us in showing us how this is possible is that we act as God does.

Full text of the readings

We don't let ourselves act only in reaction, because in Matthew's gospel there when he tells us, "You must be perfect as God is perfect," he says, "because God always lets God's sun shine on the just and the unjust. God lets rain come upon the just and the unjust," because God doesn't change because of the way people are, and we ought not to change because of the way people are to us.

To be perfect as God is perfect or to be holy as God is holy means we are always to try to be who we are, and not just act in response to what somebody does to us and change our way of action because of that. So as we begin to do this, we really begin to change ourselves radically as Jesus urges us.

I think one of the reasons why we have difficulty with these passages is because we think that it means being passive in the face of evil, that we just let people walk over us, but that isn't it at all.

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What Jesus says right at the beginning of today's passage: "I tell you this, do not oppose evil with evil." He doesn't say do not oppose evil. He simply says do not oppose evil with evil.

In other words, again, act according to who you are -- someone made in the image and likeness of God -- regardless of what people do to you. You oppose evil.

And in that passage, Jesus gives us some specific examples of how you oppose the evil.

Someone strikes you on the right cheek and Jesus is thinking of someone slapping you with the back of their hand to humiliate you. Well, you turn the other cheek and it becomes impossible for someone to strike you with the back of their hand, so you resist the evil, you oppose it, but it's in a way by disarming the one who is doing it.

Jesus goes on: if someone wants you to go one mile, go two. They aren't forcing you; you are opposing them by going beyond even what they are asking.

So Jesus is telling us, we must be always ready to oppose the evil, but not to do it with evil.

Isn't that what's been happening in Cairo? People are opposing evil, violence, oppression, but they're doing it in a very peaceful way.

This morning I read that now in Bahrain, where the government was using terrible violence against the people who are out in opposition, the government has backed off once more. The people keep pouring forth into the square in the capital of Bahrain, and now the government is backing off.

You oppose the evil but you do it in a non-violent way. This is what Jesus is telling us today and urging us to live according to this new way that he is proclaiming in this Sermon on the Mount, that we must be holy as God is holy; we must be perfect as God is perfect.

We might find it very difficult to do this but again, Jesus challenges us: Look, if you don't act different from those who don't believe in God, what's so special about that? If you love only your friends, you're no better than anyone else. Even the pagans do that, Jesus says; that's a very normal thing.

We have to go beyond it just as God does. Don't just love those who love you; love your enemies. Do good to those who hurt you. This clearly is the most challenging of what Jesus proclaims, but enemy love

is the one way that we will change our world.

Enemy love, loving those who hate us, who do evil against us -- that is the one way that we can break the cycle of violence and make a world of justice and peace.

Our second lesson today reminds us of what makes it possible for us to act beyond what we might think is possible, because St. Paul, in writing to the church at Corinth reminds them, "Do you not know that you are God's temple? God's spirit abides within you."

Jesus is living within each of us. So if we really want to change our lives, if we really want to live according to these challenges of the Sermon on the Mount, remember that Jesus is living within our hearts, and if we touch into the spirit of Jesus who lives within us, Jesus will enable us to act like him because he is the one who gives us the supreme example of loving your enemies.

When he's being executed, put to death on the cross, he loves those who are doing it: "Father, forgive them."

We can touch into the spirit of Jesus and this will enable us to change our lives, and then because the reign of God is at hand for those who do it, we begin to experience the peace and the joy and the love of the reign of God, and we help to transform our world into that reign of God.

[Bishop Gumbleton gave this homily at St. Hilary Parish in Redford, Mich.]

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