

Seventh Sunday of the Year February 19, 2017

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

The universal call to holiness goes all the way back to the Old Testament. God's people have always been called to be holy. Often holiness is identified with the manifestation of closeness to God and at the same time with suffering and pain accepted as the divine will. But holiness is a special call where we commit ourselves to live a life according to the divine plan or living a life as God would like us to live. In the first reading Moses calls his people to holiness manifested through their actions. The Book of Leviticus gives us some specifics about God's expectations: not to be angry, not to hate, not to make false judgment, not to seek revenge and not to hold grudges. Moses tells them that the ways to holiness are summed up in the command: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord." In his letter to the Corinthians Paul reminds us that we have received the Holy Spirit and if the Holy Spirit dwells in us, then we are his temples and God dwells within us. Paul says that worldly wisdom can destroy the Temple of the Lord. In Gospel of today Jesus continues his teaching on law. He tells us how the law must be understood in today's context. He tells us that our attitudes and actions lead to imitate God who is merciful, kind and loving. He tells us that the law must lead us to live a life of holiness where we discover God in people, both our friends and enemies. It is easy to love those who love us, but Jesus asks us to do much more, to love our enemies. When he says to be perfect like the heavenly Father he sets a high standard for us and he himself becomes the shining example of such holiness.

The first reading from the Book of Leviticus tells the importance of the Law as they are specially called to fulfill their call in creation, to live fully the image of God. During their yearlong stay at Mount Sinai the Israelites received many instructions from God. The passage elaborates that the ultimate purpose of the Law for ancient Israel was to teach them how to be holy as God is holy. Since God's essential nature and will are unchanging and unchangeable, there are principles behind these laws which will help us understand God and teach us how to please Him. But, since God's law is adapted to man's situations, the expression of laws have changed from the Old Testament to the New. The Law helps us see the holy nature of God. As partners in God's covenant the people of Israel were expected to reflect in their own lives the kindness and love they experienced from

God. God showed his mercy and forgiveness and the concept of revenge is outside his purview. Just as God is disposed towards mercy and forgiveness so also the people of Israel should be. Revenge and holding grudges have no place within God's people. The Law was given to Israel for their good. If they kept his law God abundantly blessed them.

In the second reading Paul tells the Corinthians that each one of them is God's Temple and God's Spirit dwells in their hearts. If anyone destroys God's temple, certainly God will destroy that person because God's temple is holy. He reminds them that everyone carries the image of God as they have been created in his image and likeness. That is why we should treat the other people with such reverence and concern. Here Paul is speaking specifically of Christians who form the Body of Christ but, in other ways, every single person is made in the image of the Creator and God is present in some way there. He warns those who are championing the individual preachers that they are destroying God's Temple by causing divisions. We are being called on to recognize and respond to God's presence in every single person and creature that we meet. This should be the behavior even when the person acts in ways totally contrary to God's ways. In fact, it is precisely then that the God in me has to reach out and affirm the God in the other. He warns the Christian community against all worldly wisdom. Real wisdom recognizes that everything and every human person belong through Christ to the Father. He concludes saying that in life or death, entire thing belongs to Christ and through him all belong to God.

In today's Gospel we are presented with the most radical section of the Sermon on the Mount. Here Jesus tells his disciples how their righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees. He presents once again the basic principle and its application, namely, our holiness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus begins in an area that seems rooted in humankind's basic nature: violence and revenge. He recounts the oldest written law, the Law of the Talion, meaning such for such or tit for tat. The Gospel uses the phrase as written in the law, "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth." This law was found already in the Code of the Babylonian King Hammurabi. The law stated that if a person sustained an injury, the same injury was to be inflicted upon the perpetrator. The law was repeated in the Book of Exodus mainly to avoid wars between groups and to contain the concept of revenge. It also implied that punishment could not exceed the injury done. This law existed in the settling of disputes between

different tribes. If a person of one Tribe caused any physical injury to a person of another tribe, the accused person received similar injury and justice was done.

Jesus here proposes a quite different approach to the law. He abolishes the old law of limited vengeance and introduces the new spirit of non-resentment and of non-retaliation. He pushes the law still further to say in his teaching that there should be no vengeance at all. He tells them that it is necessary to have a deep inner commitment that sees beyond the mere external reality. He goes on to take three examples where the Christian spirit is in operation as he tells his disciples not to resist an evildoer. In the first example he says that if anyone strikes them on the right cheek, turn the other cheek also. This example goes far beyond the blow given, since to hit on the right cheek is to hit a person with the back of his hand which is more hurting and at the same time a greater insult. As Jesus understands the law, it means turning the other cheek is not weakness; it requires tremendous inner strength and security. Jesus himself gives the example when he is falsely accused and rejected by his people. Now Jesus challenges us by his teaching as he says: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you". He urges us to imitate the all-embracing love of God who accepts all. From the human point of view to love and forgive our enemies is next to impossible. Jesus chose the path of love and forgiveness even when he was wrongly judged, persecuted and killed. Forgiveness is a gift of God and those who ask him for this grace obtain it so freely because God is full of love and forgiveness.

In his second example Jesus speaks about the tunic being taken away through a law suit. He tells the disciples that if anyone wants to sue them and take their coat, they ought to give their cloak as well. Tunic was a long inner garment and even the poorest person had a pair of them while cloak was a blanket like garment used also as a blanket at night and mostly each person had only one. Even the Jewish law said that the cloak may not be taken permanently away from the person as it is the sole possession. A generous Christian does not stand for his rights and he is willing to sacrifice everything. The third example of Jesus tells us of the second mile. The law of the second mile is a picture from an occupied territory. In an occupied country at that time the soldiers could force the citizens into service, as it happened to Simon of Cyrene who was compelled to carry the cross of Jesus. If the soldier from the Roman army forced them to walk with them one mile carrying their luggage, they should be generous to walk the longer distance than what is prescribed by the law. The entire practice is to show extra

kindness has to be done in a spirit of generosity. Hence Jesus says that a Christian may not refuse to give but when he gives it must be done privately and secretly, as an act of generously and privilege.

Jesus presents in his Sermon the basic principle of Christian Love. This is said to be the central section of the sermon which gives the concentrated expression of the Christian ethic of personal relations. Jesus tells his disciples that they must love their enemies. He places before them the expression of the old law which stated that they have to love their neighbour and hate the enemy. But the law that Jesus gives says that they must love their enemies and pray for those who are persecuting them. This is necessary to distinguish them from others and to recognize that they are the children of the Father in heaven. He himself shows the practice of the law in his life as he forgives them from the cross. Jesus prescribes his love beyond all human understanding to accept someone with benevolence and good will even when he insults or plants injury. Jesus does not say that we must love our enemies the same way we love our near and dear ones. To love our friends it comes naturally as it stems from our hearts and our will. It is something we cannot help and it comes instinctively and naturally. To love our enemies would involve a determination of the mind, to do something we really do not want to do but do it with a purpose, for God. Jesus tells us to conquer our natural tendency to anger and to bitterness and achieve this good will.

Jesus laid down this command for us as a basis of personal relationships. It is not a concept of pacifism, but rather a call for universal brotherhood. Most important of all is that this commandment does not allow people to do what they like. However, the problem here is the understanding of the word 'love'. Generally speaking, to say we love a person is to have warm feelings of affection towards them or even personally caring for them. Certainly Jesus is not asking us to have the same feelings one has towards his life companion or a friend as against the feeling towards a horrible person who has treated us badly. He just wants to treat the evil one as a person, a child of God and not have the set of revenge planned on to him. During his trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus was struck on the cheek and accused of insolence. He simply said, "If I have done any wrong, tell me what it is. If not, why do you strike me?" There is no anger, no vindictiveness, and no abuse. He simply speaks to his accusers in quiet, reasonable terms in a totally non-violent way. He retains his dignity while they lose theirs in violence and abuse. He does not cringe before them; in fact, he

stands up to them. At the same time he wants his disciples to do something more. He wants them to pray for their persecutors, as he did from the cross. No person can pray for another if he hates him. We cannot hate another in the presence of God.

'To love' in the Gospel context means to 'wish the well being of'. It is a unilateral, unconditional desire for the deepest well being of another person. It does not ask me 'to be in love with', to have warm feelings for someone who is doing me and others serious harm. But we can sincerely wish the well being of those who harm or persecute us. We pray that they may change, not just for our sake but also for their own. We pray that from hating, hurting people they become loving and caring people. Further, Jesus tells us that the basic reason for doing this is to manifest God's love towards us. He points to the fact that the action of God is unconquerable benevolence. He is the one who makes his Sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. The love of God is such that he does not take pleasure in the destruction of any of his creatures. He tells them that if they love those who love them in return, what extra reward they can receive. Those who are labeled as sinners and outcasts do the same. Again he says if they greet only their brothers and sisters, they cannot be called extraordinary persons. A Christian therefore has to be outstanding and his actions must go beyond the ordinary person. In this way he can manifest that he is the child of God our Father in heaven or god-like persons.

The passage concludes with Jesus saying, "Be perfect, then, as your heavenly Father is perfect." On the face of it that sounds like a commandment which cannot possibly have anything to do with us. Indeed no one of us can even faintly connect ourselves with perfection. This obviously is an ideal, a goal to be aimed at. The perfection intended is not total perfection but rather to aim at that total impartiality of a God who extends his providential care and love equally to all. In the dry, scorching heat of the Middle East, all, good and bad, have to endure the burning sun and enjoy the gentle, cooling rain. God stretches out his caring love to all, good and bad, and he does not love the bad less than the good people. So, if we want to identify with Him, we have no right whatever to withdraw our love, that is, our desire for wholeness, from a single person. Whether a person returns our love or God's love is not important. If we reflect on it, we will begin to see that this is the only reasonable way for us to deal with people both for our own personal growth and fulfillment and as contributing also to that of others. Jesus is

not asking us to do something impossible and unreasonable. He tells us to open our eyes and see the reality and discover the most sensible way of relating ourselves with the people around us. He tells us to realize the purpose for which we have been created, namely to be the children of God.

One day, a man was walking along the shore. As he looked down the beach, he saw a young person reaching down to the sand, picking up something and very gently throwing it back into the sea. As he got closer, he called out, "Good morning! What are you doing?" The young person paused, looked up and replied, "Throwing starfish into the sea." Why are you throwing starfish into the sea?" he asked. "The sun is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them in they'll die." "But, don't you realize that there are miles of beach here and starfish all along it. You can't possibly make a difference!" The young person listened politely. Then knelt down, picked up another starfish and threw it into the sea, past the breaking waves and said..."Made a difference to this one."

In the film "To Kill a Mockingbird", Gregory Peck plays the part of a white lawyer defending a black man accused (wrongly, as it turns out) of rape. One day one of the white townspeople comes up to Peck and spits in his face to express his disgust at a white man defending a "nigger" who raped a white woman. Peck stands there dignified and silent and slowly wipes the spit from his cheek. He says nothing; he does nothing. But it is clear which of the two men has lost his dignity. (And, of course, it turns out that it was a white man who raped the girl.)

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