

Dcn. Jerry Homily

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, February 19-20, 2022

Today's reading from Luke about loving your enemies is one of the most difficult Gospels for me. Jesus is telling us something that is counter-intuitive to me – turn the other cheek. Growing up on the south side of Chicago, my dad and uncles started teaching me to box when I was about three. Growing up in those neighborhoods you assumed you needed to protect yourself and others – you needed to be able to face bullies and other tough guys. The alternative was not pleasant.

If there were bullies picking on my sisters, it did not take a great deal of force to get them to back down. But if they hit me and I turned the other cheek, well, I did not know what would happen because I never tried it. That is not completely true because in eighth grade there was this girl, Nancy, that I and Gary, a classmate, were smitten with. He wanted to fight to decide whose girlfriend she was. I thought she should decide. I was trying to follow the Gospel and refused to fight. After about thirty minutes he punched me in the stomach and walked away in frustration. When I turned to Nancy, she said she liked everyone so that did not resolve the issue.

The Vietnam War provided another challenge to this issue of peace. There were some anti-war activists who were genuine pacifists and some who were political opponents of U.S. policy and were even willing to engage in violence to achieve their ends.

Counseling people in troubled marriages provides a more difficult issue with the phrase “turn the other cheek”. Sometimes that phrase has been used to encourage an individual, usually a woman, to stay in an abusive relationship. That is not Church teaching. The Church recognizes that a woman should be safe and the safety of her and her kids is paramount, and if she needs to leave a relationship to stay safe, then that is what she must do. This is not a situation to turn the other cheek. Turning the other cheek would do you no good and just enable your abusive spouse.

So what did Christ mean? Bishop Barron would say that to turn the other cheek you have to step in to your aggressor and it is kind of a non violent act of defiance. Maybe.

We know how Christ died, and as I was trying to figure out this Gospel earlier this week, I was reading Isaiah 50-53, the Suffering Servant section of Isaiah, and I remembered that from the beginning, from the time of Adam, we were told that Jesus would be both the sacrificial lamb and the priest. When He turned the other cheek, Jesus willingly participated in His own torture and death. Why? Because that was the act needed to save us. I do not understand why that sacrifice, the second person of the Trinity being spat upon, mocked and tortured and killed in a most brutal way, was necessary. But maybe that was the act that was needed to show His self gift and love to us.

The story of St. Longinus, the centurion who pierced Christ's side, was filled with grace by the blood and water that washed over him and he was converted. It is interesting that when Jesus was preaching in Nazareth, and the people wanted to stone Him to death, He passed through their midst. This was not about dying; it was about accepting death when it furthered spreading the Father's message of mercy.

Later, in Acts we see both Peter and Paul in different situations not leaving their prison cells in order to evangelize their jailers. And yet there were other opportunities when Peter and John did leave their cell but then went to preach to the Sanhedrin. They did not use the opportunity to escape, but to do God's work. The same is true for Paul. At one point he was lowered from the city walls in a basket to escape but he then went on to preach and suffer many beatings before he was beheaded. But always spreading the Good News was paramount.

Today the polarization in this country is greater than anything in my lifetime. It is greater than during the civil rights movement and greater than during the anti-war movement. Two people can look at the same information and come to entirely different conclusions depending on their perspective.

As we sit in Mass today, there are discussions of a major war with Russia over the Ukraine. Christ's message to turn the other cheek is particularly important today. How do we interpret and implement His message? There is a question of discernment in what we do. When St. Stephen was dying and asked for forgiveness for those who took part in his martyrdom, as Pope Benedict XVI said he was planting a seed in the heart of Saul who would become Paul on the way to Damascus.

We forgive our enemies, we are generous and merciful because God is merciful to us. He died as an act of sacrifice. His apostles never really understood the message until after the Resurrection and until after Pentecost. It is not surprising that we have trouble understanding the message. It is particularly easy to understand why we have trouble accepting this message in our hearts. Do we love our enemies? Do we have faith that even if we suffer the fate of the early disciples, most of whom died for the faith, that we will achieve our eternal reward?

Part of the reason I have so many problems with this Gospel is that I have a hard time giving up control. If someone hurts me, or even slights me, it is hard. Was it an accidental slight or did I misunderstand words or an accidental bump? I can stew over these concerns and become anxious. How much harder is it to deal with someone who slanders me or uses politics to get something I think I deserved? Or worse, someone you trust, a spouse for example, is unfaithful. You feel devastated and angry. Can you be merciful and turn the other cheek? What response is most likely to get you to heaven? What response is most likely to get the other person to heaven?

Turning the other cheek does not mean you will not get slapped again. It means you are responding as Christ would. It means you are responding as the merciful Father desires. This is a very difficult message, a very difficult journey. Christ does not promise us it will be easy. He promises us that He will give us the grace to deal with these burdens. Can we commit to be Christ-like when threatened? May He grant us the grace.

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