

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 20, 2011

Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. The breath-taking command of Jesus from his Sermon on the Mount raises not only a challenge but a problem. It highlights a critical four-letter word: love. Love is the golden jubilee of a wedding. Love is a one-night stand. Love is a child born of self-giving. Love is erotic joy between equal partners. Love is pornographic power and possession. Love is God giving Jesus to a cross for us. Love is tough self-sacrifice. We love cats and cars; we love pizza. Another way of saying “good-bye,” “Love ya.”

Love is in peril of losing its meaning when it comes to mean anything at all, or nothing. Love is difficult to define. If I want to grasp the meaning of love, I would do well to look first to God: who God is and what God has done. Who is God? From the First Letter of John: “God is love.” God’s life reveals a loving community of divine Persons. God’s outreach reveals a powerful God who shaped a universe to mirror divine love, an imaginative God who fashioned male and female to image God’s love, a compassionate God who gave his Son to a torturous cross not from necessity but from an excess of love, not just for a few but for every woman and man.

Now let’s move to Jesus, to the love Jesus preached. Jesus loved the law of Moses. Jewish law was summed up in a single verse from Leviticus: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” It is this kind of love that Jesus preached. When a Pharisee asked him, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” he responded, “Love God with all your heart, soul and mind.” Then he added a second commandment, “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” This commandment “is like” the first. Loving your neighbor is like loving God. Not to love the human images of God is not to love God.

More than that, Jesus made quite clear what he meant by “neighbor.” It was not only the family next door in Nazareth, but the scribes and Pharisees in Jerusalem. Not only fellow Jews in the fold, but the despised Samaritans. Not only the common folk who “spoke well of him,” but his relatives who thought he was crazy. Not only Lazarus and his sisters but the sinful woman who bathed his feet with her tears and the paralytic imprisoned on his cot, the despised toll collector

and the leper ostracized from society. Not only John who loved him to the end, but Peter who denied him and Thomas who doubted him and Judas who sold him for silver.

I'm a social psychologist. A recent issue of the Journal of Social Psychology featured two articles on love and its chemistry. Granted their limited scope – romantic love and the recent interest of biologists and anthropologists – it still is a discouraging commentary on our cultural priorities when the story of love is restricted to evolutionary roots, brain imprints and biological secretions. Not a word about a kind of love that ties us to our common humanity and the redemption of all of us by a God-man on a bloody cross.

Of such realities is fashioned a Christian love of enemies. Not an easy love. Jesus proposes: "Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile..." This is something I must be taught, must learn. It is not inherited, not a function of my genes. When the chips are down, when reason fails to sway me, when I see no trace whatsoever of the image of Christ in the other, then I love those who hate me, who destroy my dear ones, who starve the world's children, simply because Jesus tells me to.

In the way in which Jesus understands it, turning the other cheek is not weakness. It requires tremendous inner strength and security. We don't see enough of that kind of strength in the world today. The slightest offence is replied to in a hail of bullets and bombs. But, as we know from the various flashpoints around the world, it is bound to fail. It has failed in Northern Ireland. It is failing in the Middle East. It has failed between India and Pakistan. We see what happens in our world when hate and violence are returned by hate and violence. Popular uprisings can lead to political change when the military stands aside.

In Jesus I see with my own eyes, hear with my own ears, love of enemies in action. I stand beneath a cross and hear a God-man murmur through blood-stained lips, "Father, forgive them." Listen to Paul: "... While we were still enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of God's Son." A sobering thought: The enemy is not "out there." We – all men and women – we are the enemy transformed by Christ's love. With that in mind, we dare not divide the

world between “us” and “them.” What makes love of enemy possible in my life as well as in Christ’s is the God of compassion active within me, the God who *is* compassion.

The Gospel concludes with Jesus saying, “Be perfect, then, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” This obviously is an ideal, a goal to be attained. And 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. God stretches out his caring love to all, good and bad, and God does not love the bad less than the good. So, if we want to identify with God, we have no right whatever to withdraw our love, that is, our desire for wholeness, from a single person or nation.

Let us not, then, just see this teaching of Jesus as pie in the sky, something that is hopelessly ideal. 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 but to open our eyes and see what is the only really sensible way to live and relate with the people around us.

And why should we treat other people with such reverence and concern? Because, as St. Paul says today, “You are God’s temple and God’s Spirit dwells in you. If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy and you are that temple” – and so is that person next to me right now.

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