

February 19, 2023 – Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
Authentic Discipleship Requires a Forgiving Heart
Gospel of Matthew 5:38:48
Fr. Oliver

Today's readings explain why Christians are expected to be holy and how we are meant to become holy people. The first and second readings give us reasons why we should be holy, and the Gospel describes four ways of becoming holy people prescribed for us by Jesus, using three examples of graceful Christian retaliation when people offend us and violate our rights and privileges. The first reading, taken from the book of Leviticus, teaches us that we should be holy because it is the command given to us by God through Moses: "*Be holy, for I the Lord, your God, am Holy.*" In the second reading, St. Paul gives us an additional reason to be holy. We are to keep our bodies and souls holy because we are the temples of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit lives in us. In the Gospel passage, taken from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us four ways of becoming holy as God is holy.

One day, Mother Teresa was asking a baker for some bread to feed the hungry children in her orphanage. The baker was furious with her request for free bread. Not only did he turn her down, he spat at her. In response to his outrageous actions, Mother Teresa calmly reached deep into her pocket, took out her handkerchief, wiped the spit off and said "***That was for me; now what about some bread for my poor children?***" The baker was touched by Mother Teresa's love and greatness, complied and thereafter provided bread for the children in the orphanage.

Mosaic Law of retaliation: During their captivity in Egypt, the Jews became familiar with the crude tribal law of retaliation. Moses instructed the Israelites to follow tit-for-tat retaliation, rather than to wreak total destruction upon their enemies. That is, instead of mutilating or murdering all the members of the offender's family or tribe, they should discover the offender and punish only him/her with an equal mutilation or harm. By advising, "*Turn to him the other cheek,*" Jesus instructs his followers to forgive an insult gracefully and, so, convert the offender. He commands that we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, demonstrating that we are children of a merciful Heavenly Father.

The true Christian reaction: For Jesus, retaliation, or even limited vengeance, has no place in the Christian life, even though graceful acceptance of an offense requires great strength and discipline of character, as well as strengthening by God's grace. Jesus wants his disciples to repay evil with kindness. Instead of retaliation, Jesus gives his new law of love, grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, and no retaliation. Jesus illustrates the Christian approach by giving two examples.

- 1) **Turn to him the other cheek:** Striking someone on the right cheek requires striking with the back of one's hand, and according to the Jewish concept it inflicts more insult than pain. Jesus instructs his followers to forgive the insult gracefully and convert the offender. It is interesting that Gandhi said, "Everyone in the world knows that Jesus and His teaching are non-violent, except Christians."
- 2) **Go with him two miles.** Roman law permitted its soldiers and other officials to require people to carry a burden for a mile. Service of this sort could be quite oppressive. Here, Jesus tells us that a Christian has the duty of responding, even to seemingly unjust demands by helping or serving gracefully, not grudgingly.

The second part of today's Gospel passage is perhaps the central and the most famous section of the Sermon on the Mount. It gives us the **Christian ethic of personal relationships**: love one's neighbours and forgive one's enemies. Above all, it tells us that what makes Christians different is the grace with which they treat others with loving kindness and mercy, even if they don't deserve it. If we only love our family and friends, we are no different from pagans or atheists.

A pastor's Sunday homily on today's Gospel was about forgiving our enemies. Toward the end of the homily, he asked his congregation, "How many of you have forgiven your enemies?" About half held up their hands. He then repeated his question. As it was past lunchtime, this time about 80 percent held up their hands. He then repeated his question again. All responded, except one small elderly lady. "Mrs. Jones?" inquired the pastor, are you not willing to forgive your enemies? "I don't have any." she replied. "Mrs. Jones, that is very unusual. How old are you?" "Ninety-three," she replied. "Oh Mrs. Jones, what a blessing and a lesson to us all you are here! Would you please come down in front of this congregation and tell us all how a person can live ninety-three years and not have an enemy in the world?" The little sweetheart of a lady tottered down the aisle, faced the congregation, and said "I outlived the old hags."

We become perfect when we try to love as God loves, to forgive as God forgives, and to show unconditional good will and universal benevolence as God does. All this we can do only with His ongoing Grace for which we need to ask, and then to receive and use.