

7th Sunday
2/20/2022

A DIFFERENT SET OF RULES

Sister Helen Prejan is a Sister of St. Joseph best known for her work with death row inmates and opposing capital punishment. Her labor has been recounted in a movie and then an opera both entitled, Dead Man Walking. In the film version at least, she has a first meeting with a hardened, murderous, death row inmate. He doesn't have much need for her saying something to the effect, *I'm the strong type and Jesus is the turn the other cheek type*. Sister Helen responds, *It can take a lot of strength to turn the other cheek*. It can take a lot of strength to turn the other cheek.

Today's gospel reveals some of the most challenging and beautiful words of Jesus; words that seem to defy common sense; words often ignored even by those who profess to follow him. These words on one hand strike us as counterintuitive and yet on closer examination, there's a wisdom to be found there. To turn the other cheek, literally or figuratively can seem as being a passive, cowardly victim, but it can also be something else.

Think of Mahatma Gandhi and his followers who stood up to violence not with violence but with a peaceful, defiant resistance. Think of peaceful civil rights protesters in the 1960s, who despite beatings, being fire hosed or even having had dogs unleashed on them, didn't respond with to violence with violence but rather with a peaceful yet defiant resistance.

What these and so many others have done and continue to do is to say: *I'm not playing by your rules*. You treat me with violence to force me to treat you with violence so you can treat me with more violence and I'm not doing it. Obviously, there are times to defend ourselves and especially others, but there are also times to say, *I'm not playing by your rules*. It can take a lot of strength to turn the other cheek.

Fortunately, for most of us, I hope people aren't striking us on the cheek, but it may be something like resisting a verbal taunt or holding our tongue when we want to lash out at someone, or not letting someone push our buttons.

But to turn the other cheek isn't all there is to this. Jesus tells us to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, to bless those who curse us and to pray for those who mistreat us. Perhaps this gospel holds some of the most disregarded words of Jesus. When was the last time you prayed for, much less loved, your enemies? When was the last time we did good to those who hate us, blessed those cursed us or simply prayed for those who mistreated us.

In 1981 there was an assassination attempt on St. John Paul II that nearly took his life. The next or following day I went to Mass. We prayed for the pope but the priest said that in a spirit of Christian charity, we also pray for his would-be assassin. He was sharing a gospel value. He was following a different set of rules, a gospel set of rules.

Our own St. Therese tells the story of one sister in her religious community. Sister St. Augustine didn't slap her on the face but she always irritated our saint with what she said or did. What to do? She followed Jesus' instructions to love, do good, bless and pray. St. Therese resolved to pray for her, she did good for her, when tempted to speak unpleasantly to her, Therese smiled and tried to change the subject. She strove to love Jesus in that difficult sister. In her own way she turned the other cheek. She followed a different set of rules, a gospel set of rules.

To sum all this up, we call it being merciful or as Jesus puts it, *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful*. We could add *because your Father is merciful*. Mercy isn't bland weakness. Mercy is seeing and loving with the eyes of God. It's seeing the good that remains beneath what is bad. This too is another way of saying, *I'm not playing by your rules*. As disciples of Jesus we're called to follow his rules not those of the world.

Justice and mercy go together. Justice calls us to what we are to do and mercy strengthens us when we fail at that. Because God is merciful to us, we seek to share that mercy. To be merciful is to be god-like, to be holy. God's mercy calls us to deeper conversion, to deeper intimacy with him.

What Jesus talks about is illustrated by his ancestor David in the first reading. Saul is the king convinced that David is trying to take away his crown which isn't true. And yet Saul is literally on a hunting expedition for David—Coming upon Saul, David shows mercy. He respects Saul as God's anointed and won't kill him. David

shows great though limited mercy. There were many others to whom David did not show the same mercy.

In the light of Christ there is something else. Jesus is the new, heavenly Adam that St. Paul speaks of in the second reading. Jesus is also an anointed one. He is the true messiah, the true Christ and to be a Christian is to be a little Christ, a little anointed one. That means in Christ, we are to treat other Christians with reverence as other anointed ones. What about those who aren't Christians? Well, they are all potential, future Christians and even if they do not come to believe, Jesus tells us to love, to good and pray for them. To still treat them with reverence and love. It can take a lot of strength to turn the other cheek.

It can take a lot of strength to be merciful as our Father is merciful. As we stand in need of his mercy, and so we need to show his mercy. Because we have received his mercy in the person of Jesus, we seek to reflect his mercy. *Forgive and you will be forgiven.* That's another way of saying, *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.* One author as noted that we're not going to love everyone the way we love our spouse or family members, but we're called to love them seeking what is good for them.

Is all this hard? Yes. Is it challenging? Yes. Is it something we do alone? No. As with all other virtues, it's something we grow into with time. We depend on God's help, God's mercy to allow us to act with mercy. We do it informed by the word of God, strengthened by prayer, encouraged by one another, assisted by prayer, enriched by the sacraments and especially nourished by the Eucharist where the true messiah, Jesus Christ nourishes us with his body and blood under the form of bread and wine. In all this we're strengthened to play not by the rules of the world but by the rules of Jesus, who by his words and by his life, death and resurrection, reveals the mercy of our Father.