

7th Sunday OT (Year A) – February 19, 2017

LV 19:1-2, 17-18; PS 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13; 1 COR 3:16-23; MT 5:38-48

There's an incident in our family history that has become sort of comic legend.

About twenty-five years ago my brother-in-law, Larry, was driving with my *then*, three- or four-year-old nephew, Andy. Another driver did something to frustrate Larry so he gestured his displeasure at the other driver with what some people call the “**one-fingered salute**”, clearly forgetting for the moment that his son was in the car seat behind him. Andy, *like most little kids who notice everything their parents do*, picked up on it and asked his dad what the gesture meant.

Later, when they got home, Andy ran into the house and said to his mom—my sister Margaret—“**Momma, here's what Daddy did in the car today!**”

My sister—trying to suppress a laugh—said, “**What does *that* mean?**”

Andy replied, “**It means, ‘I don't want to be your friend’**”.

Nice recovery, there, Larry!

A couple of days ago, I was driving north on **I-17** and some trash came flying out of a vehicle ahead of me in the next lane to my right. There are two things that can take me from **zero to furious** in an instant—one is people who **talk on their phones in the church**...and the other is **littering**. I suppose the only thing that would be worse would be someone **littering...in the Church**...while using their **cell phone**!

Anyway, when I saw the trash fly out of the vehicle ahead of me, I had a powerful *impulse* to speed up and let the driver know that...“**I did not want to be their friend.**”

I really *wish* I could say that what held me back was that I was deeply **inspired by** God's command from our 1st Reading from **Leviticus**:

Though you may have to reprove your fellow citizen, do not incur sin because of him. (Lev 19:17)

In reality, if I would have followed through with what my **sinful instinct** was compelling me to do, I would have had to cover my collar with the other hand so as not to reflect badly on the **Church** and the **priesthood**.

Thankfully, I kept my peace—if only **externally**—and reluctantly accepted the reality that I could not change that driver’s heart in that moment, nor could I stop the fast food wrappers from bouncing down the freeway behind us.

It bothers me to know the lack of charity I am be **capable of** if I weren’t restrained by my collar. It bothers me to know how little self-control I would exercise without the restraint of this visible symbol of my Catholic priesthood. ***It bothers me that it was my collar...and not my heart...that caused me to hold back in that situation.***

This incident gives us a good starting point to consider what it means to be a **real** Christian in a world full of **real** challenges to Christ-like **love** toward friend **and** enemy alike.

To a certain degree, even though priests are rightly held to a higher standard of Christ-likeness, in some ways it can be **easier** for a priest to maintain this Christ-likeness—at least for a priest who **wears his collar all the time in public**.

But if we think about it, Jesus is calling us to restrain ourselves in situations that might elicit **anger**, **retaliation** or **vengeance**, *not simply* because we adorn ourselves on the **outside** with the clear “markings” of our faith—like the priest **collar**, a **Crucifix**, or a **Saint bracelet**—but rather, because we have allowed him to **form** our **hearts** on the **inside** to be more like his **Sacred Heart**. But until we’ve learned to give Jesus our heart, these external reminders do provide us with many occasions to **practice** the restraint that Jesus calls us to exercise—kind of like “**spiritual training wheels**”.

To **really** understand the level of charity Jesus is calling us to...and **why** he does so...we need to dive more deeply into the Scriptures. We start with the **1st Letter of Peter**, which describes the standard that **Jesus** himself set for us:

Christ...suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. (1 Pet 2:23)

Jesus trusted his *Father in Heaven* to sort out the ugly stuff. His obedience **to...**and trust **in...**his Father superseded any possible human impulse to retaliate. His Father—*Our Father*—revealed his *name* to Moses when he gave him the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. Here’s how the **Book of Exodus** describes it:

...the Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...” (Ex 34:5-6)

And here we see the origins of what our **Psalm** today proclaims...and what the mercy of God means for *us*.

Merciful and gracious is the LORD, slow to anger and abounding in kindness. Not according to our sins does he deal with us, nor does he requite us according to our crimes. (Ps 103:8, 10)

Today’s Gospel is a continuation of the **Sermon on the Mount**, which we have been hearing for the past **3 Sundays**. In last Sunday’s Gospel, Jesus said:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. (Mt 5:17)

Jesus’ reference, here, to the **Law and the Prophets**—helps us understand why *a well-informed Christian* cannot just be a *New Testament Christian*. If Jesus came, not to **do away with**, but rather, to *fulfill* the Old Testament Law, then we have to know the “**what**”, the “**why**” and the “**how**” of this fulfillment.

When Jesus refers to the familiar “**eye for any eye, tooth for a tooth**” standard, we must know **what** that law said, and *why* it was put in place, in order to make sense of **why** and **how** Jesus is taking it to the “**next level**”. So, let’s look at the wording of this law from both the Books of **Exodus** and **Leviticus**.

If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. (Ex 21:23-25)

When a man causes a disfigurement in his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; as he has disfigured a man, he shall be disfigured. (Lev 24:19-20)

To us, in our **modern culture**, this standard sounds absolutely *brutal*. But *prior* to this particular formulation of the God-given Law, human law allowed for **greater** retaliation for an injury. So, for example, if Person A **stole** from person B, person B might **KILL** person A. To even the playing field—to stop things from *escalating*—God restrained the sinful human tendency to **overreact**...to resort to *overkill*.

It's important that we pause here for a moment to understand *why* we need God's intervention in our lives **today** just as much as the people of the Old Testament times did. Sinful human nature is such that, unrestrained by God's laws, we are capable of horrific acts. But lest we be too quick to look down on the people of Old Testament times for their seemingly **primitive brutality**, let's realize that, one day—hopefully in the not too distant future—the generations to come will look **back** at *us* in 2017, and consider *us* brutally primitive for allowing—by **law**—the **killing** of *babies*...in the *womb*, by their own *mothers*...with the help of their *doctors*. What we've accepted as normal as a society will one day be views as the **brutal** tragedy that it is. **But, as for now, our hearts are not there yet.** Which is precisely why we need a **Savior** just as much today as they did in **1500 B.C.**

The Old Law principle of **restrained retaliation**, while clearly an improvement on what went before, still leaves a **violent standard of justice in place**, where *the penalty is determined by the one causing the first injury*. If the perpetrator is particularly brutal, then the retaliation will be equally brutal.

When Jesus charges us to “**turn the other cheek**”—a euphemism for refusing to retaliate *without sacrificing our dignity*—he is not trying to make us into **Christian “doormats”**. He's asking *us* to work with *him* to change the “**you did it to me, so I'm going to do it back to you**” world, into a **Golden Rule** world, which he summed up this way:

...whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets. (Mt 7:12)

Here's the bottom line: Sinful human beings are **quick to anger** and **merciless** when left to our own corrupted inclinations.

The difference between **God's slowness to anger** and a **human being's quickness to anger**—that *space*—is the window of opportunity where God's grace can **operate...and influence...and heal**...where Jesus can change our hearts, to make us more like him, just like he was like his Father. This “**in between**” space is where the hurt and brokenness lies...where we are most *unlike* God...and where we most *need* his **grace**.

Where the **law of retaliation** reigns, the **perpetrator** determines the extent of the evil.

Where the **law of Christian charity** reigns, *Jesus* sets the standards. Retaliation keeps the violence going. Mercy stops it dead in its tracks!

Human beings tend to **escalate**...Jesus came to *elevate*.

So...we must decide which law will govern **our** heart, but we can't do it *without* Jesus. Thank God he gives us both the **commandment** and the **grace** to fulfill what he asks of us. He does it all **for** us...and *in* us...and the result is a world where his love becomes visible and can change our hearts...and others' hearts.

Left to our own devices, we don't stand a chance, because apart from Jesus, we can do **nothing** (cf. Jn 15:5). He said so himself. On the other hand, **through** Jesus, **with** Jesus and **in** Jesus—and with **Jesus in us**—St. Paul's words take on a new meaning:

I can do all things in him who strengthens me. (Phil 4:13)

The Saints started out as sinful human beings just like you and me. But what made them different was **not** that they made **themselves** good. What made them different—what made them **holy**—is that they gave their hearts to Jesus, so that Jesus could, in turn, give them **his** heart—his **Sacred Heart**—by which to **live**—and through which to *love*...friend...and foe alike.

When the Saints realized that they could not make themselves Saints, they gave Jesus permission to do it for them. And he was happy to oblige.

We can do allow him to do the same for us.

All we have to do is ask.