

Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time, February 19, 2023

Our Lady of Perpetual Help

First Reading — Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18

1And the LORD said to Moses, 2 "Say to all the congregation of the people of Israel, You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy." ... 17"You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbor, lest you bear sin because of him. 18You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD."

Responsorial Psalm PS 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13

R. (8a) The Lord is kind and merciful.

Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all my being, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

R. The Lord is kind and merciful.

He pardons all your iniquities, heals all your ills. He redeems your life from destruction, crowns you with kindness and compassion.

R. The Lord is kind and merciful.

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.

R. The Lord is kind and merciful.

As far as the east is from the west, so far has he put our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.

R. The Lord is kind and merciful.

Second Reading — 1 Corinthians 3:16-23

16Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? 17If any one destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are.

18Let no one deceive himself. If any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. 19For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," 20and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile." 21So let no one boast of men. For all things are yours, 22whether Paul or Apol'los or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; 23and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's.

Gospel Reading — Matthew 5:38-48

38"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; 40and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; 41and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you. 43"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

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INVITATION TO PRAY

Pause for a few moments of silence and enter more deeply into the presence of God...

Proclaim the Scriptures out loud

As you listen to the scriptures be attentive to a word, a phrase, a question, an image, or a feeling that emerges. Reflect on this quietly or share it aloud.

INVITATION TO REFLECT

I enjoy watching track and field events, and when I read this week's Sunday's Scripture, I was reminded of a high jumper who having just competed at the highest level, raises the brackets a notch higher to try and break his all-time best jump. This week's First Reading with its "You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy," and the Gospel Reading with its "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" are like brackets setting the bar one notch higher to express God's expectation for his children. The goal is to be like the Father in our attitudes and behavior, to set the bar any lower is to not have a goal worth shooting for. If the First Reading and Gospel Reading establishes the "end" for which we should strive, perhaps the second reading indicates the means by which we can attain to righteousness. St. Paul reminds the Corinthians, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"... For all things are yours, ... you are Christ's; and Christ is God's". You see, living a life of holiness or perfection (spiritual maturity) would be wholly unattainable if we only had our own human resources to rely upon, but thankfully that is not the case. Instead, God chose to make his dwelling place within us. Additionally with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, all things we need for a life of holiness comes to us with, and in, Christ, as Christ unites us to the Father. This is especially clear from 2 Peter 1:3; "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence," As most people know, there is no end to human hurts and woundedness due to the injustices of others. To various degrees we are faced with them continually. Stoically enduring injustice may enable some people to survive emotionally, but stoicism is not sufficient to triumph over these injustices. Lashing out in anger or withdrawing in fear may provide a moment of release, but invariably anger and withdrawal settle into our heart as resentment and bitterness which taints all of our life, and sadly the lives of many around us. Unfortunately, there are many, many Christians who are walking around heavy hearted with hurts and woundedness from which they have found no release, nor escape. Many, relying on the foolish wisdom of the world, respond to injustice with the comment, "I'll forgive, but I will never forget what was done." They are trying to be forgiving but they do not realize that in choosing to remember, the wound is never allowed to heal nor the peace of forgiveness ever found. Each bitter remembrance picks the wound open again, and again. This week's Responsorial Psalm illustrates God's holy and perfect standard of forgiveness. "He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities. ... as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." Notice in this passage that God, who had every right to exact retribution for the wrongs done by us to him, instead chooses to remove or separate our sins from us to such an infinite distance that they are no more us (that is what forgiveness is). In another passage in Isaiah the Father says, "I will not remember them anymore." That does not mean that he cannot remember them but that he wills not to remember them anymore. From personal experience I know this is difficult, but I also know it is possible to choose, to will, not to hold someone's sins against them, and to remember them no more. If our Heavenly Father who is holy can do this for us and our sins, surely the forgiveness we receive should motivate us to be forgiving like him. Like the high-jumper, rising to new heights of righteousness may be difficult, but remember that in Christ we have been given all that is necessary to help us attain to Christ-likeness. When it comes to how we relate to others, lowering the bar to simply human standards is not an option, it is only an illusion of righteousness.

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INVITATION TO GROUP SHARING

First Reading —

1. How does your dictionary define “holy”? Which part of the definition is most significant to you?

Second Reading —

2. How would you answer the question in verses 16?
3. What are the practical implications of “For all things are yours, ... and you are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s.”

Gospel Reading —

4. How literally should verses 38-42 be taken? If they are not intended to be taken literally, how should we apply them?
5. Have you ever had an opportunity to put this passage into practice? If so, would you share it briefly, while still maintaining the person’s confidentiality?
6. What should we do if our graciousness toward another person is ignored or taken advantage of?

INVITATION TO ACT

Determine a specific action (individual or group) that flows from your sharing. When choosing an individual action, determine what you will do and share it with the group. When choosing a group action, determine who will take responsibility for different aspects of the action. These should be your primary considerations.

CLOSING INVITATION TO PRAY

Give thanks to God (aloud or silently) for new insights, for desires awakened, for directions clarified, for the gift of one another’s openness and sensitivity. Conclude with a final prayer.