



February 12, 2023

Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time

"Be holy, for I, the LORD, your God, am holy."

Leviticus 19:2



Dear Friends,

Once someone came to me for counseling. She was going through a nasty divorce and her ex-husband was manipulating the children to get back at her. The children were nearly teenagers. He told the children that their mother and her family were crazy. He actively tried to destroy the relationships the children had with the family of his ex-wife. The attacks were personal, exaggerated, and vicious.

The wife asked me what she should do. I advised her not to do or say anything. If she reacts her ex knows he scored a victory. If she tries to defend her family, he will tell the kids that their mom knows it's true. He would say she only is covering for her family. To say nothing will take the energy out of his attacks. I said her to her, "Your children are very intelligent. If you do not react to your ex-husband's attacks, the children will soon figure out that he is the one who is crazy." The children continued relations with the wife's family. And though they had difficulties with their dad they were able to have a relationship with their father. If the wife reacted in retaliation, it would not have worked out as well.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives practical advice. Rather than escalate tensions by defending ourselves against attacks, Jesus has another strategy. Rely on the community to deescalate tensions. It is better to preserve the life of family and community (as best we can) rather than tear it apart in search for an imagined justice.

Jesus gives three examples of humiliating circumstances. He asks the humiliated disciple to suffer the shame and give up the right to defend their honor. Being hit on the right cheek means a back-handed slap from a right-handed person, or an open slap from a left-handed person. Both are highly insulting. By asking disciples to turn the other cheek Jesus is saying, *"Don't let anyone slap you as if you were beneath them. Turn the other cheek to say, I am your equal and more because I will not lower myself to your level."*

Resorting to the courts in Jesus' culture is very shameful. Arguments should be settled before that stage. If a poor person uses their cloak as collateral on a loan the lender was required by law to return it for the night. This is because the cloak was not just an outer garment but was used as a sleeping bag at night. To offer their tunic as well as the cloak a person would be publicly naked. It would show how a corrupt justice system strips the poor naked while awarding the greedy rich.

It was legal for soldiers to force private citizens to carry their military gear for one mile and no more. When the conscript offers to carry the burden further, the bully finds himself in the awkward position of pleading for the favor not to be done, lest he be severely punished for the abuse.

Today in the Book of Leviticus God speaks through Moses. God invites the people to imitate Godself, *"Be holy, for I, the LORD, your God, am holy."* The Hebrew word for 'holy' literally means 'to be set apart.' What sets God apart is God desires a loving relationship with Israel. The prophets will use the language of love and marriage to describe this relationship. The LORD desires to be close to all his people. God desires to maintain and heal that loving relationship even during the times the people were unfaithful.

We are called to imitate God in connectedness and right relationships. We recognize our failures to live in respectful relationships with each other. Jesus invites us to find clever ways to love our enemy. Instead of fighting back on evil's terms Jesus invites his followers to maintain their dignity in the face of injustice. The best way to overcome an enemy is to make them a friend. We must invite our oppressors to become more human, more like God who *"makes the sun to rise on both the bad and the good."*

Peace,

Fr Ron

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