

HOMILY SUNDAY 7-C

“Give; Forgive, and Let Live”

(1 Sm 26:2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-25; Psalm 103; 1 Cor 15:45-50; Lk 6:27-38)

Have you ever heard the statement, “I’ll forgive, but I won’t forget”? Or have you ever heard someone say in a loud, angry voice, “I’m NOT angry!”?

Live the Law of Love: Forgive, and Do Not Judge. In other words, Give; Forgive and Let Live.

I stopped by a house one day when out jogging as a young priest in Beauval and found a drinking party in full swing. I felt angry and upset and then noticed a young lady I did not recognize drinking with the rest. I was told she was from Montreal Lake, had just arrived in the village, and was already staying with someone. I got angry at her then, thinking we had enough people living common-law already. I had to pass right by her on the way out, however, and I forced myself to talk to her and got to know her a bit. She told me she ran away from an abusive partner who had locked her in the trunk of a car. She excused herself for being a bit high, and promised she would sober up and come to visit me at the rectory that evening.

I continued jogging, and on the way back into the village heard a boom. A house was on fire, and a woman was caught in the basement. It was the lady from Montreal Lake. It seems that after talking to me, she went to that house to rest, fell asleep, and died in the fire. I was shaken, feeling partly responsible for a while, and guilty for how I had so quickly judged her. In the end, I was grateful for the short conversation we had, the bond that was so quickly established between us, and especially for her desire to change that perhaps readied her to die. To this day, I still remember vividly the girl from Montreal Lake who taught me not to judge people.

The readings today take us right to the heart of who God is; who we are meant to be, and what it means to be a Christian. David is a God-like example, a Christ-like figure. He repented. He was righteous, and merciful, not taking advantage of Saul. He was prayerful, always seeking the will of God.

The psalm is a highly developed image of God as merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, full of compassion for all who revere Him. It beautifully describes what God does for us: God forgives all our iniquities and transgressions; heals all our illnesses; redeems our lives from the pit of death, and crowns us with steadfast love and mercy.

As rich as these readings are, the gospel looms over them like a towering mountain. Last week, the Beatitudes set the bar of Christian life very high, praising the poor in spirit and those who suffer persecution. Today, in this gospel, God in Jesus speaks words that challenge; the Golden Rule that stretches us to the limit; the Law of Love that seems even outlandish and extravagant. We are asked to love our enemies; to do good to those who hate us; to turn the other cheek; to pray for those who abuse us; to give our clothes and money to those who ask without expecting anything back; to be merciful; to not judge and in the end to try to understand others with God’s generous compassion.

Who can live this? Who can possibly carry out this teaching? Could Jesus really be serious, we ask?

This is impossible, we want to protest. How can this be? How can he really ask this of us, when we have a hard enough time trying to love our family members let alone our enemies?

Without pretending to have sublime answers to this mystery, I would like to offer a possible insight. Jesus can ask these things of us because he is absolutely secure in his loving relationship with the Father. When people know that they are truly and unconditionally loved, accepted, understood and in an intimate relationship with another, then an infinite horizon spreads out before them. They can look upon life and all it presents without fear, without avarice, without jealousy or possessiveness because in a very real sense, they have what is most important in life, and all else is seen as secondary and not that important. They are experiencing the Beatitude, “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.”

I had a sense of that in the words that my brother spoke to his wife in an intimate conversation one day. Because of their intimacy, love, acceptance of each other, affirmation of each other and mutual caring for each other, he was able to tell her that there was nothing more that he needed or wanted. She was deeply moved and touched to the core of her being, and so was I.

Jesus is speaking out of that same sense of “having it all” and that is what he wants for us. He knew himself to be totally and fully loved by the Father. He also knew that he was communicating to us that same love that he had with the Father, so naturally he would expect of his disciples, the same awareness and behaviour that he would manifest. His Incarnation and life among us, and ultimately his death on the cross for us, would vividly validate God’s amazing, astounding, unconditional, undeserved love for us. His powerful words in the Gospel are simply an invitation for us to respond in kind.

While this insight might make the call of the Gospel a bit more understandable, it doesn’t make it any easier. Forgiveness, especially of those who are not repentant, is never easy. Here are some suggestions to make loving one’s enemies a little easier.

First, we can let go of the event, let go of the need to be right, let go of the desire for revenge, and above all let go of the tendency to stay stuck in our story, our self-justifying always-expanding version of what happened.

Second, we can express our feelings of anger, hatred and desire for revenge with love. To do this with love is to refrain from retaliating in kind – no retaliation, no name-calling, no revenge of any kind. To do this with love is to be just like Jesus, and when we act like Jesus, we get to feel like Jesus. We can journal our feelings and share them with a friend. Above all, if possible, we can express those feelings, again with love, to the very person who hurt or abused us. That emptying of ourselves in this way creates a space for the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of forgiveness, to flow through us and heal us of our painful emotions.

Third, we need to pray for the ability to do this. The saying “To err is human; to forgive is divine” is so true. It was prayer that helped David not strike the “anointed of the Lord.” To forgive on our own power is impossible. We must pray from the heart for that ability.

The imperative to love one’s enemies can have a range of meanings, depending on the context: Win over your opponent by kindness; take the moral high road; shame your enemy by your superior

goodness; deflect hostility or prevent further abuse by offering no resistance; rise above pettiness; or demonstrate a Christ-like character as a Christian witness. These interpretations are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, but they do suggest the range of meanings the command can have.

Striking a person on the cheek was a form of insult – a physical expression of cursing or reviling. Turning the other cheek is a dramatic and physical form of non-retaliation that breaks the cycle of violence and rejects the principle of retaliation.

I want to share with you a letter written by a courageous young person who decided to turn her life around, take this gospel seriously, and forgive her abuser. Here is the letter that she wrote to him as part of her healing journey:

“Dear abuser, I need to share something with you. I am trying to forgive something you did to me. Remember last year when you were at our house, you and me were watching TV, and you did something that felt really wrong. My life was really going good, the way I wanted it to be, but since that night my life totally changed. I felt dead, I felt dirty, and I felt ashamed of myself. At times, I felt like killing myself. Tell me why did you do that to me? Why did it seem like my life was wrecked when it was going so well? I don’t want to live the life that I used to live after you molested me. Thank you for reading this letter. I hope that writing this letter to you will help me to heal myself and forgive you. Once again, why did you do this to me? Is it because something like this happened to you when you were younger? Maybe you need help also. Sincerely, D”

The words of Jesus in the Gospel today are not a dream – they are meant to be lived and actualized in our lives. In the end, could it be that every human being is a “Saul” – an anointed one? If so, then we are invited to see others as God sees them, loved and called. Be merciful as God is merciful. Forgive as we have been forgiven.

As Corbin Eddy puts it, “**In the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are invited to discover how there is healing in the very act of offering healing to another, forgiveness in the very act of offering forgiveness to another, even if not received or accepted. In Jesus himself the cycle is broken, in him divine mercy and compassion take human form, in him all persons, even the ungrateful and the wicked are embraced as loved, called, ‘anointed’.**”

The Eucharist we celebrate today is our greatest prayer. It is a meal of love, an agape, an experience of forgiveness. As we are forgiven and healed, we are sent out to do the same, to be forgiveness and healing for a broken world.

So believe in the love God has for us in Jesus Christ. Give your love away, even to your enemies. May our celebration today strengthen us to go out and do the impossible as Jesus did, be generous, forgive and not judge, through the power of his Spirit within us.