

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time

If we wanted to find the most challenging, most difficult, most confounding passage in all of the gospels, this just might be it.

It is also the most fundamentally Christian - because it is the passage that calls on each of us to be the most like Christ. More than that, it calls on us to be “perfect, like the Father is perfect.” That is a high order.

And look at what it involves, turning the other cheek, giving away your cloak. And the most radical of all: Loving your enemies and pray for those who mistreat you.

It sounds so nice and reassuring. But do we know what that means? Do any of us?

We have to take a moment to think and reflect on our own life.

Consider all the people who have hurt you. Those who have lied to you. Stabbed you in the back. Remember the ones who spread rumors about you that were untrue. Those who have gossiped about you, or judged you, or mocked you, or bullied you.

Consider the friend that you trusted, who betrayed you. The co - worker who broke a confidence. The person whose name you would rather forget who wounded you, or disrespected you, or took advantage of you or even abused you. Look back on all the people in your life who have left bruises and scars, with a word or a look or a touch.

Now, imagine doing what Jesus commands. Love them. Love them and pray for them.

Pray for their good. Pray that grace will come into their lives. Pray that their eyes may be opened, and their hearts may be healed. Because the chances are, if someone has hurt you or persecuted you, it is probably because someone once did the same to them.

It is a vicious cycle. As Shakespeare put it like this: “Sin will pluck on sin.” And that fundamental truth of our humanity - that the cycle just keeps going - may be one reason why Jesus, in this gospel passage, says: “Stop. Enough. Break the cycle. Let it go.” Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors.

I have a hard time with it, I will tell you. It is actually pleasurable to do the opposite - to hate your enemies and to wish the worst on your persecutors, to enjoy their setbacks and suffering. When you are angry, I have found, it makes you happy. It puts a spring in your step.

But that kind of thinking is ultimately self - destructive. And Jesus himself knows that. He knows we can do better. He knows we can aim higher.

Be perfect, he says, just as your heavenly Father is perfect. In the final moments of his life, he showed us that perfection. He taught us what he meant. Surrounded by his enemies and his persecutors, he hung on the cross, stripped, bleeding, gasping, as they gambled for his clothes and waited for him to die. And in that moment, Jesus pleaded and prayed: “Father, forgive them. They know not what they do.”

Here is Christian perfection - our model for living, captured at the moment of death. Here is love beyond measure: a prayer for a broken and unknowing world.

At one time or another, each of us has been suspended on our own cross, feeling helpless, or hopeless, facing cruelty or injustice. Maybe some of us are there now, angry at what life has done to us. How do we pray for, and love, those responsible? How do we begin?

A popular preacher during the Depression, Emmet Fox, once explained it in a way I think we all can understand. And it starts with something so simple, but so hard: forgiveness. It is a necessary first step. He says: “by not forgiving we are tied to the thing we hate. The person perhaps in the whole world whom you most

dislike is the very one to whom you are attaching yourself by a hook that is stronger than steel. Is this what you wish?"

I think we all know the answer. We need to detach ourselves from that hook. Then, and only then, can we begin to heal, and to love, and to pray for those who have hurt us so deeply.

Today, as you approach the altar to receive the body of Christ, pray to detach that hook. Pray for the grace to love the unlovable, to forgive the unforgivable, and to remember in prayer those you would rather forget. I have a long way to go to achieve that. I think most of us do.

But only in beginning that journey toward love, only then can we dare to approach the perfection Christ spoke of - a perfection we can never fully reach, but to which we all have to strive, day by day, prayer by prayer. Work to be more than what you are, Christ said. Strive to be perfect, like the Father. Jesus showed us the way. How could any of us not try to follow?