

Homily of Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday which marks the beginning of the Lenten Season. The readings of this Sunday prepare us for the Lenten Season.

First reading: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them: Be holy, for I the Lord, your God, am holy.'" Second reading: St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "Brothers and sisters: Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" Gospel reading: Jesus said to his disciples: "So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect."

In the Book of Genesis is the account of how our all holy and all perfect God made human being in his image and likeness. God breathed into human being his Spirit (Genesis 2:7). From then, human being became the temple of God and the Spirit of God dwells in human being. As the image of God and the temple of God, we are challenged to live life that shows that we possess God's Spirit, and that we are his dwelling place. Since it is practically impossible to be holy and perfect as God, we are invited to participate in God's holiness and perfection. As the Collect of Sixth Week prays, "That we may be so fashioned by you grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you." Let us briefly examine some of the challenges and invitations in the readings.

"You shall bear no hatred for your brother or sister in your heart" (first reading). St. John says, "Anyone who hates a brother or a sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him" (1John 3:15). Just like anyone who looks lustfully has committed fornication or adultery in the heart (Matthew 5:28); also, anyone who hates his brother or sister has murdered the brother or sister in his or her heart. Hate which is an intense feeling or passionate dislike for someone poisons the heart and leads to various evil and murderous behaviors. The Spirit of God flees from a person who hates.

"Though you may reprove your fellow citizen, do not incur sin because of him" (first reading). St. Paul advises us to speak truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). St. Paul also says, "Teach and correct each other wisely" (Colossians 3:16). It is no longer reprove or admonishment when there is abuse and violence.

"Take no revenge and cherish no grudges against any of your people" (first reading). Jesus does not limit this command to one's people but everyone. Jesus goes as far as nullifying the Mosaic Law that permitted a protective and proportional vengeance or punishment on an offender, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Exodus 21:24), and the people's practice of hating their enemy. Jesus says, "Offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one to him as well. If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him for two miles. ... Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you..." Jesus' teachings such as these make Christianity a very radical religion different from many other religions.

Sometimes, we have a hard time in understanding what it means to offer no resistance, turn the other cheek, hand over one's cloak, and go the extra mile. We can understand the teaching in the following five ways: (1) We are not to take the path of violence. (2) We are not to take the path of revenge and retaliation by repaying evil with evil, but treat those who hate us kindly. (3) We are to take the path of peace and reconciliation. (4) We are to forgive our offenders. (5) We are to pray for our offenders.

Living out the radical teachings of Jesus in our world infested with dishonesty, corruption, oppression and violence, and where bad people do every imaginable and unimaginable evil to get what they want is a big challenge to us. Does Jesus teach his followers to surrender, succumb and submit to forces of evil and evil people in the name of love, peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, and prayer? No.

At the beginning of this reflection, we acknowledged that we are the temple of God and the Spirit of God dwells in us. The Spirit of God in us is not "a spirit of fear, but one of power, love and sound judgement" (2 Timothy 1:7). It is based on the sound judgement that the Catholic Church states in Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 79, "As long as the danger of war persists and there is no international authority with necessary competence and power, governments cannot be denied the right of lawful self-defense, once all peace efforts have failed." Based on lawful self-defense Jesus says, "One who does not have a sword should sell his cloak and buy one" (Luke 22:36). Jesus also says, "Behold, I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and simple as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

St. Paul encourages us, "Finally, draw your strength from the Lord and from his mighty power. Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil ..., that you may be able to resist [and] hold your ground. So stand fast with your loins girded in truth, clothed with righteousness as a breastplate, ... And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:10-17). Fortified in these ways, we will be able to obey Jesus' commandments of turning the other cheek and going the extra mile, but also able to contend with the world infested with evil.

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