

SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: FEBRUARY 19, 2023

Our gospel today continues our reading of the Sermon on the Mount which we began with the Beatitudes three Sundays ago. This is the fourth installment. One Jesuit writer said that the Sermon on the Mount is so baffling, we either have to ignore it or pretend we never heard it. I think people do both. If we pay attention to it we may even find ourselves recoiling from the words of Jesus. Or, just maybe, we will become a freer person.

Let's start with the concluding words, "Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect." Now let me ask all of you, is anyone here perfect? Don't be shy. Stand up and profess your perfection. Okay, that is a relief to know we are all human enough to admit our imperfections. Well, then, let's look at the Book of Leviticus, our first reading today. "Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." I won't ask you to stand for this one as I am confident that there are many of you who are holy. Perfection and holiness mean accepting our likeness to God who is totally love, who pours the Godself out in love, who shows us how to love in Jesus.

Children need rules, directions, boundaries. They need to find security in an environment of love and care. To let them do anything they want anytime they want is not loving. They need to develop a value system to sustain them. To think we can let them grow up before they decide their own value system is a betrayal of love and care. They need the Ten Commandments. They need practices that enshrine relationships to God, other people, the earth, and even themselves. My own opinion is that there are many children and young adults adrift because they have never been given a value system that goes beyond their own immediate needs and desires.

The values systems of children could use more analysis and discussion. I want to jump to adults. I believe Religion for many people is still on this first level, that of children. Rules, boundaries, clear doctrines, a desire for certainty, fear of punishment, a need to please others. The church has tended to keep people at this level. Then we stay at this level or toss the whole system out. The challenge is to deal with doubt, uncertainty, pain and confusion and grow to another level of faith.

The Dalai Lama once advised people to learn the rules well so they could know how to break them. Not to break them in anger and rebellion but because love

requires one to transcend them. We are told that attending Mass on Sunday is an obligation. It certainly is a good thing to do for oneself and for support of the rest of the community. Can there be reasons to excuse oneself?

The Sermon on the Mount is a challenge to live an adult faith. The hard parts, such as turning the other cheek, loving one's enemies, are ideals to help us grow in faith. It is more than following rules or memorizing beliefs. It is a choice of a way of life, a vision of what life should be. It is primarily a matter of relationship with God, with Jesus, with the community, with any and all people in need. Our God is a triune God, pure love always pouring and giving life and love. We are made in that image.

What I am saying has particular relevance to Lent, a time for the church throughout the world to set aside some time to be renewed in one's faith. Children can do this in their own way. Adults in another. When I was a boy I had this little cardboard mite box to put pennies in and save up during Lent. In Holy Week my mother took me into the city (Manhattan) to the Franciscans on 32rd Street to give them my mite box to aid the foreign missions. I felt connected to a world beyond me and felt I was contributing something to it. I felt some purpose to my life. I suppose I also did some penance thing like giving up candy.

Adult Christians need to feel connected beyond themselves too but not by simply giving up things. I advise people to do less, not more, during Lent. Don't be running to church if that just makes you busier. Take time to be still, to be quiet, to pray. Pope Francis has made Lenten suggestions for all of us. First, he says, spend time listening. Listen to Jesus in the sacred scriptures and in the lives of our fellow travelers. Secondly, he advises we be real. Deal with reality, first of all my own reality. Get to know yourself more deeply so you can understand and love others. How can I grow to be more perfect, more holy?

Today is our last Sunday reading from the Sermon on the Mount. You may want to review it privately by reading the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 5-7. Actually, on Ash Wednesday, we shall hear another later section of this Sermon, the part on prayer, fasting and service. Read the daily scriptures during Lent, read them slowly. Listen to them. In the first half of Lent, the daily scriptures are on one's manner of living. The latter part of Lent focuses on Jesus as our model and brother.

Don't be gloomy during Lent. Saint Benedict says that, during Lent, we look forward to Easter with joy and spiritual longing. Now that is an adult way to spend Lent. May you have a joyful Lent!

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