Readings for February 23, 2020 – Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Turn the Other Cheek**

*We are to live differently - beginning right now- because we live our lives now in Jesus Christ. We are to love differently, because we are empowered by grace to love in Jesus Christ, and with His Love. And all of this is made possible, as we cooperate with grace. The character of Christ is being formed in us as we cooperate with grace.*

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**Opening Prayer**

Lord Jesus, we want to be holy and to live our lives the way you intended. We can't do it by ourselves, so we thank you for the grace and the desire to deepen our faith, and to learn and grow more and more like you.

**Reading 1 LV 19:1-2, 17-18**

The LORD said to Moses,“Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them:
Be holy, for I, the LORD, your God, am holy. You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart. Though you may have to reprove your fellow citizen, do not incur sin because of him.
Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against any of your people.
You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.”

**Responsorial Psalm PS 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13**

R. (8a) **The Lord is kind and merciful.**
Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all my being, bless his holy name.
Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.
R. **The Lord is kind and merciful.**
He pardons all your iniquities, heals all your ills.
He redeems your life from destruction,
crowns you with kindness and compassion.
R. **The Lord is kind and merciful.**
Merciful and gracious is the LORD, slow to anger and abounding in kindness.
Not according to our sins does he deal with us,
nor does he requite us according to our crimes.
R. **The Lord is kind and merciful.**
As far as the east is from the west, so far has he put our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion on his children,
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.
R. **The Lord is kind and merciful.**
Reading 2 1 COR 3:16-23

Brothers and sisters: Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for the temple of God, which you are, is holy. Let no one deceive himself. If any one among you considers himself wise in this age, let him become a fool, so as to become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God, for it is written: God catches the wise in their own ruses, and again: The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain. So let no one boast about human beings, for everything belongs to you, Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or the present or the future: all belong to you, and you to Christ, and Christ to God.

Gospel MT 5:38-48

Jesus said to his disciples: “You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one as well. If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand over your cloak as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go for two miles. Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow. “You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Related Reflections

From Pope Francis: ‘Catholics must think like Christ’: A Christian isn’t a person who simply follows some commandments, but is a person who tries to act, think and love like Christ, Pope Francis said at his weekly general audience. Being a Christian, he said, means allowing Jesus “to take possession of our lives and change them, transform them, free us from the darkness of evil and sin.” Jesus’ death and resurrection has a practical impact on believers, “just like a house built on a foundation; if this gives out, then the whole house falls,” he added. Through the resurrection, “we are freed from slavery to sin and become children of God.”
Being a child of God, a believer, isn’t something Christians can set in a corner of the room and ignore most of the time. It implies a relationship with God that is deepened daily through prayer, reading the Bible, receiving the sacraments “especially penance and the Eucharist” and through acts of charity, he said. “And God treats us like sons and daughters. He understands us, forgives us, embraces us and loves us even when we make mistakes.”

The Pope told those at the audience not to listen to voices that try to tell them that God doesn’t matter or give in to the temptation of “putting God aside and ourselves at the center.” Peace and joy come from knowing one is loved by God, he added. “God is our strength. God is our hope.”

Pope Francis said sadness and the temptation of despair is strong in today’s world, so Christians have an obligation to be “visible, clear, brilliant signs of hope.”

Catholic Herald, April 2013 – www.catholicherald.co.uk

**We are Called for Holy Living:** The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us "All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity. All are called to holiness: "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (CCC #2013) Christians are saved from sin, death and separation from God, through Jesus Christ.

We are to live differently - beginning right now- because we live our lives now in Jesus Christ. We are to love differently, because we are capacitated by grace to love in Jesus Christ, and with His Love. And all of this is made possible, as we cooperate with grace. The character of Christ is being formed in us as we cooperate with grace.

**How can we be perfect?** This admonition from Jesus is repeated in other Gospel accounts and developed in the New Testament Epistles. Our question should not be "is it possible?" Rather, it should be "HOW is it possible?" How do we respond? Perhaps our problem with both understanding and responding is that we confuse the meaning of the word, "perfect". Filtering this word through our linguistic limitations, we may come up with a false translation.

However, Jesus has saved us from sin and death - and saved us for a new way of living. We can tend to focus on what we are saved from and forget what we are saved for. We do not yet comprehend who we are to become in Him. In Greek, the word often translated perfect is telios. It refers to something being completed, brought to its full purpose, potential and intended end and vocation. For example, in the world of objects, a hammer is telios or perfect when it is hammering a nail. In the world of subjects, things are telios or perfect when they are fulfilling their nature. In our Western minds, we can limit this word "perfect" and thereby fail to grasp its promise and potential. We think of it mathematically rather than relationally. We fail to understand it is a work in process.

The God who is Love fashioned us in His Image. We are made to love as He loves. In Jesus Christ, we are now also being capacitated - to use a term frequently used by the early father and Bishop Ireneaus of Lyons - made capable - by the grace of His Redemption - of actually loving with God's love. "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 Jn 4:16).

Notice that the concept of being "perfected' is also applied to Jesus by the author of the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews in chapter 5 verses 8-9:
"Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him." Jesus was made perfect through what He suffered? Yet, Jesus was without sin. How then was He perfected? He came into the world to redeem, to transform us by a life, and a death, and a Resurrection of perfect love. He fulfilled His purpose when He presided over the new creation from the Altar of that Cross and robbed death of its victory by bursting forth from a tomb which could not contain Love.

Deacon Keith Fournier, Catholic Online (March 2015) – www.catholic.org

Caring Without Calculation

The Christian ideal is for spirituality and ethics to form a unified whole. Followers of Jesus love their neighbor from their soul, which is filled with the Spirit of God. The more they cultivate their relationship with God, the more they care for their neighbor. And the more they care for their neighbor, the more they open to the presence and influence of the Spirit. This intertwined, reciprocal, mutual relationship is never to be broken.

There is a universal type of caring action. It does not regard the status of the person cared for, or the potential to repay us. It is a 360-degree, steady caring. It cares for those who are above the caring person, those on the same level, and those below the caring person.

[Jesus tells us in the Gospel of Matthew that the assembled nations will be divided in two at the time of judgment] The sheep will be on the right, the favored side, and goats on the left (they should begin to worry now.) So if I could interview the sheep lounging around in their recently inherited kingdom and ask them how they managed to find themselves in these excellent digs, I imagine them saying, “We just cared for every person we met, immediately, without calculation, and it was no big deal.”


“Loving God, allow me to be a sheep at least once in a while, and never let me forget that most of my life I have been a goat.”

In the Old Testament readings, God gives Moses and the Israelites the Ten Commandments. These are God’s basic instruction manual for life. In Christ’s Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), that basic instruction manual is supplied with more details. The commandments forbid murder. The Sermon on the Mount commands you actually to love your enemy, turn the other cheek to him, and so on.

The rules of God’s instruction manual are helpful; but, as we all have learned, it is hard to know in what circumstances they apply. Suppose you take the commandment about turning the other cheek to apply to someone who is beating his wife. If you apply it to mean that you should not try to stop him, you will simply be cooperating with his evil. The trick is to see that the commandment about turning the other cheek has to be applied in the context of the broader rule: love your enemy. If you enable your enemy to become more evil, how have you loved him?
Elsewhere in the Gospel (John 2: 15), Christ uses a whip to drive the moneychangers out of the Temple. In doing this, he helps us understand how to apply the rules. In cases where turning the other cheek would make your enemy worse instead of better, loving your enemy requires helping him to stop his evil in some other way. And that is why the same Christ who gave the Sermon on the Mount drives the moneychangers out of the Temple. If he had turned the other cheek to the money changers, he would have been an enabler of their evil. But it is good for them, as well as for others, that they stop the evil they were doing. And so Christ uses force to get them to stop.

Here is the thing to notice, then. God’s instruction manual for life is not limited just to the sets of rules in the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. There is a medieval saying: every act of Christ is a teaching for us (Omnis Christi actio nostra est instructio). Christ’s life and actions, as they are set out in the Gospels, are our best help for seeing how to live our lives well.

Our best instruction manual is Christ himself. (Eleanor Stump – St. Louis Univ. - www.liturgy.slu.edu)

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What does it mean to “turn the other cheek?” First, we should look at this on a literal level. Jesus did mean what He said. He is the perfect example of this. Not only was He slapped on the cheek, He was also brutally beaten and hung on a cross. And His response was, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” Therefore, Jesus does not call us to do anything that He Himself was not willing to do. Turning the other cheek does not mean that we need to cover up another’s abusive actions or words. We ought not pretend that they have done nothing wrong. Jesus Himself, in forgiving and in asking the Father to forgive, acknowledged the grave injustice He received at the hands of sinners. But the key is that He did not allow Himself to be drawn into their malice.

Often times, when we feel like another flings mud at us, so to speak, we are tempted to fling it right back. We are tempted to fight and push the bully back. But the key to overcoming the malice and cruelty of another is to refuse to be drawn down into the mud. Turning the other cheek is a way of saying that we refuse to degrade ourselves to foolish bickering or arguing. We refuse to engage irrationality when we encounter it. Instead, we choose to allow another to reveal their malice to themselves and to others by peacefully accepting it and forgiving.

This is not to say that Jesus wants us to perpetually live in abusive relationships that are more than we can handle. But it does mean that we will all encounter injustice from time to time and we need to handle it with mercy and immediate forgiveness, and not become drawn into returning malice for malice. (www.Catholic-daily-reflections.com)

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Perfection is not what being human is about. Perfection is simply not attainable in the human condition. The function of being human is to become the best human beings we can be, one insight, one mistake, at a time. Then, knowing the struggle that comes with trying and failing over and over again, we become tender with others who are also struggling in the process. – Sr. Joan Chittister
True love does not condone injustice. Jesus did walk an extra mile to heal the sick daughter of Jairus (Mk 5:22-24), but he did not walk the extra mile to please Herod Antipas. And when sent to Herod by Pilate during his trial, Jesus refused even to speak to Herod (Lk 9:9; 23:9). Jesus saw the faith and sincerity of Jairus. He saw the hypocrisy of Herod, and refused to humor him. Such responses demand real courage to do what is most loving, what is best for the other. This may mean silence in one case, confrontation in another. It always means looking to Jesus and asking for wisdom and guidance from the Holy Spirit.

Here’s a down-to-earth example:

**Turning the other cheek:** One afternoon I was talking with my friend, Jerry while he worked in his yard. He went to a bush in the front and scooped up a good deal of something unpleasant. “Where does that come from?” I asked. “It’s the next door neighbor’s dog,” Jerry replied. “Bill takes the dog for a walk every morning, and my bush is the dog’s first stop,” I said. “That’s really inconsiderate,” I exclaimed. “Why do you put up with it?” “Well,” Jerry answered, “Bill is a good neighbor in every other way, and if cleaning up after a dog is all it takes for me to keep the peace, it’s no big deal.” Many of us might have seen the dog owner’s lack of consideration as an insult, as a slap in the face. But Jerry saw things with the eyes of Jesus, kept the peace, and remained friends with his neighbor. He ranked love of neighbor ahead of indignation at what he found in his bush.

As we come to know Jesus better through study and prayer, we learn to choose as he chooses.

Fr. Oscar Lukefahr, OM

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**Ten Commandments for Mature Living:**

In his book, *Sacred Fire, A Vision for a Deeper Human and Christian Maturity,* Fr. Ron Rolheiser lists his “Ten Commandments for Mature Living.” Moving beyond the “Thou shalt not’s” of the Bible, Rolheiser’s commandments invite the reader to a higher place, a deeper relationship with God and with one another. Because their lessons are so important to understanding our role as mature disciples, I hope Father Rolheiser won’t mind my sharing them with you. They are:

1. Live in gratitude and thank your Creator by enjoying your life.
2. Be willing to carry more and more of life’s complexities with empathy.
3. Transform jealousy, anger, bitterness and hatred rather than giving them back in kind.
4. Let suffering soften your heart rather than harden your soul.
5. Forgive—those who hurt you, your own sins, the unfairness of your life, and God for not rescuing you.
6. Bless more and curse less!
7. Live in a more radical sobriety.
8. Pray, affectively and liturgically.
9. Be wide in your embrace.
10. Stand where you are supposed to be standing, and let God provide the rest.

- From a review of the book by Kathy Schiffer, Patheos.com
“Knowing God is more important than knowing about God.”  Karl Rahner, S.J. (1904-1984)

“You eventually become the God that you love.”  - Fr. Ronald Rolheiser

Meditation Suggestion:
Take 5-10 minutes to silently reflect on the following thoughts and the prayer. Then, share any thoughts that came up for you with the group, if you are willing.

Reflect, today, on any relationships that are difficult for you. Especially reflect upon how ready you are to forgive and to turn the other cheek. Doing this may just bring you the peace and freedom you seek in that relationship. Or, reflect on any times when you were unable to make the holy choice of behavior in a certain situation. How did that feel? What might have helped to change your reaction?

Or, reflect on this idea: Author Henri Nouwen writes that we often hold tight with clenched fists to our fears, to our bitterness or resentments. What am I holding tightly in my clenched fist? How can I learn to gradually open my fists and give it to God – put it in God’s hands?

Prayer: Lord, help me to imitate Your great mercy and forgiveness. Help me to forgive those who have hurt me and help me to rise above any injustice I encounter. Jesus, I trust in You. Help me to learn to choose as you chose.

Discussion Questions

Does the idea of having to be perfect keep you from approaching God in a more intimate way? Do you find it hard to bring all the imperfect stuff to God?

If God knows we are not perfect, why do you think this scripture passage tells us to “be perfect?”
Holiness is rare, like a gem, and we don’t attain it without God’s help. When have you recognized moments of holiness in the world, or someone who seems particularly holy?

What has Jesus shown us in other Gospel accounts to give us hope – to reassure us that we can always change our hearts and “be saved?” (Think about the people he encounters in our readings for the next few Sundays). How many times do we hear him say, “Your faith has saved you?”

What can help us to choose as Jesus chooses? To think and act with the heart of Jesus?

**Closing Prayer:**

Dear Jesus,
help us to spread your fragrance everywhere we go.
Flood our souls with your spirit and life.
Penetrate and possess our whole being so utterly
that our lives may only be a radiance of yours.
Shine through us and be so in us
that every soul we come in contact with
may feel your presence in our soul.
Let them look up and see no longer us, but only Jesus.
Stay with us and then we shall begin to shine as you shine,
so to shine as to be light to others.
The light, O Jesus, will be all from you.
None of it will be ours.
It will be you shining on others through us.
Let us thus praise you in the way you love best
by shining on those around us.
Let us preach you without preaching,
not by words, but by our example;
by the catching force -
the sympathetic influence of what we do,
the evident fullness of the love our hearts bear to you.
Amen.

• Cardinal John Henry Newman