

The Seventh Week in Ordinary Time
February 19, 2017

A long time ago, God told Moses to assemble the entire community of Israel for an important message. So Moses did as he was told and God said: "Be holy, for I, the Lord God, am holy." What on earth did that mean? It seemed redundant to call God holy; what else could God be?

All the people knew was that to be holy, they needed to obey God's laws, but how could that make them holy like God? Did God obey the Ten Commandments? Obviously, God had no spouse or parent, nobody to whom to offer sacrifice, and all plants and animals belong to God so neither stealing, envy or jealousy can apply. See the problem? How in the world can one hope to achieve the holiness of God? Was it a misprint?

Well Jesus issued essentially this same command at the end of today's Gospel, except that Jesus used the word "perfect" instead of "holy." But that still sounds like an impossible demand.

So the minute we ask that question, we can hear an echo of the first chapter of Genesis: "God created humankind in the image of God." So then we must have some potential! So that means our major problem is with our definition of holiness or godly perfection.

If we work backwards in today's Gospel we hear about God's balanced treatment of the just and the unjust, those well known for their goodness and those known for anything but love of God or others.

Think of it this way: The measure of God's holiness or perfection seems to be the way God sends sun and rain to everybody. That must be what Jesus meant when he

said: "Love your enemies that you may be children of your heavenly father." And if we think that is only so much pious theory, he gave a few practical and even surprising examples of just what that looks like in practice.

But before we go to the examples, we need to explore the translation that says "offer no resistance to one who is evil." When did Jesus let evil pass unopposed? A better translation of that statement is "Do not react with hostility to one who is evil." That's an entirely different thing from not resisting evil. So the practical question is how to resist evil without hostility.

Jesus suggests that when somebody slaps you, you should turn the other cheek. The play in this bit of wisdom comes with the carefully chosen word "slap." Jesus didn't say "When your spouse beats you," or "When the gang bullies you again," instead, he said, "When somebody slaps you." A slap was meant to demean rather than to really cause physical harm.

A slap doesn't invite a fistfight; it's an insult, a power play in the social hierarchy. Note too that the slap Matthew portrays was backhanded (right hand to right cheek). Jesus was describing something intended to put the victim in his or her place rather than to incapacitate her or him.

Turning the other cheek changed the game by having the victim say, "Hit me with integrity and then we'll see." Maybe a few members of the crowd gasped as they pictured a browbeaten servant finally standing up like that to an arrogant master.

It's the same thing with walking the extra mile. A Roman soldier could force a local resident to carry his pack, but for only one mile. The offer to go a second mile robbed the soldier of the initiative and put him in danger of being reported for going

beyond the limits. By now Jesus' audience was beginning to smile at the image of a Roman soldier pleading to get his pack back from a clever, audacious, yet peaceful rebel.

So what does God's holiness look like? It looks like a never-ending outreach to rebellious humanity, an ongoing invitation to communion, the incarnation of love, no matter the cost. It looks like a person who approaches an oppressor with an attitude that says, "We can be better than that!"

It looks like Oscar Romero and Dorothy Day, Mother Theresa and the little kid who forgives his brother who when he's just taken his favorite toy.

Speaking of St. Theresa of Calcutta, one day she went to a local bakery to ask for bread for orphan children. The baker, outraged at people begging bread from him, spit in her face and refused.

Mother Teresa calmly took out her handkerchief, wiped her face and said to the baker, "Okay, that was for me. Now what about the bread for the orphans?" Silence followed and the baker gave her the bread.

For several weeks now we have listened to Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount as he gave us several examples of what it would mean to love one another simply because we are made in the image of God, and God is love.

It is possible to go beyond the boundaries of quid-pro-quo business-like relations to experience the miracle of receiving a gift and being a gift for others. This is the grace of the Eucharist that we pray for today: to be like God, to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect in love.