

## Homily for the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 19, 2023

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

*First Reading: Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18 (Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 103 (The Lord is kind and merciful.)*

*Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 3:16-23 (The wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God.)*

*Gospel: Matthew 5:38-48 (Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.)*

Today's gospel continues where we left off last week, presenting us with more challenging teachings from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus cites a law that is widely quoted, but poorly understood. We have all heard it said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Most people wrongly interpret that phrase as a justification for taking vengeance: "If someone hurts me, *the Bible says* that I should do the same thing to him." Actually, the Bible says just the opposite. We heard the commandment from Leviticus today: "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."

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" is a *legal tenet*, not a moral teaching. It was never intended as a guide to right conduct. This law appears in the Book of Exodus, in a section where appropriate punishments are decreed for various crimes, sort of like the sentencing guidelines that tell modern judges the maximum penalty that they can impose on a defendant who has been found guilty. The purpose of this particular law is to limit retribution to *no more* than an injured party has suffered, so as to stop grievances from escalating out of control. The law encourages the one who has been wronged to seek only *equal* retribution, with the hope that the perpetrator will consider this a just punishment and allow the conflict to end. Of course, forgiveness and reconciliation would be an even better outcome, but that would not be a matter for a judge to decide. The injured party would have to forgo vengeance *voluntarily*, rather than exercising his rights under the law. Jesus tells his disciples to do just that, offering no resistance to one who does evil to them.

Most of us who were raised in Christian households probably heard that same advice from our parents when we were young. Whenever we said, "He hit me first," the response was always that classic bit of parental wisdom: "Two wrongs don't make a right." In other words, though we might consider ourselves justified in lashing out at those who have hurt us, in reality, the same sinful behavior is just as wrong when we do it to others as when they do it to us. We try to tell ourselves that the other person's conduct was wrong because it was *unprovoked*, while our retribution is righteous, because the other guy deserves it. But, that's merely an excuse to do wrong and call it "right." Our parents were correct when they taught us to put aside "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" and just "let it go" instead.

What's puzzling about this gospel, though, is that Jesus doesn't tell his disciples simply to "let it go." Instead, he tells them that when they are mistreated, they should invite even *greater* injustice from their persecutors. Don't just refrain from striking back; turn and offer the

other cheek, as well! Don't just relinquish your tunic without a fight; offer your cloak, as well! Don't just agree to being pressed into service for one mile; offer to go two miles instead! Why?

The point may be to publicly *shame* the aggressors in the eyes of all those who witnesses these events. For example, if you see someone get slapped in the face, you might suspect that he said something offensive to provoke that response. But, if he then calmly turns and offers the other cheek and the guy strikes him *again*, then your assessment of the situation is going to change completely. You're going to conclude that this is more likely a bully attacking a helpless victim, and you're going to be disgusted by his behavior.

Next, Jesus suggests a clever way for his disciples to bring shame on their persecutors who wish to haul them into court. There may be justification for someone to go to law with you over your tunic, but no law would enable someone to seize your cloak *and* your tunic, leaving you naked. In their culture, that would be more shameful for the person who *seizes* the clothing than for the person who loses it.

The last example is even more clever, because everybody knew that under Roman law, soldiers were entitled to press someone into service for *up to one mile*. If you were to offer to go two miles instead, that would put the soldier in a difficult position. He would no longer have the upper hand in that relationship. *You* would be the one deciding how far you want to go with him and when you want to stop. So, in all three examples, Jesus is suggesting a nonviolent way to turn the tables on our persecutors and put them to shame, while we come out on top, with our dignity and our righteousness intact.

Up to this point, Jesus has demonstrated a remarkable degree of *worldly wisdom*, showing his disciples how to manipulate a more powerful aggressor and put him to shame. Next, he shows his mastery of *heavenly wisdom*, proving St. Paul's contention that "the wisdom of the world is foolishness in the eyes of God." The Old Testament saying, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy," seems quite sensible to most people. So, why on earth would Jesus tell his disciples to love *their enemies* and pray for those who persecute them? That seems not only counterintuitive, but almost absurd, *until* Jesus reveals the logic of his teaching by posing some penetrating rhetorical questions.

He asks what is so special or praiseworthy about loving *only* the people who love us. After all, even the *worst sinners* love those who love them and are kind to those who are close to them. So, why should we Christians, who consider ourselves children of God, feel satisfied with such pitifully low standards of conduct? The Book of Leviticus presents a much more *appropriate* standard: "*Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.*" That's the guiding principle throughout the passage from which we heard just a small excerpt today. The passage consists of several commandments, including the famous, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," with each one followed by the solemn declaration: "I am the Lord." In other words, "Fulfill this commandment, and you will be holy like me, the Lord." Jesus makes the very same point, concluding his teaching by saying, "*Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" As God's children, that should *always* be our goal. We should strive to imitate our heavenly Father's virtues as perfectly as we possibly can, even to the point of loving our enemies.