

Sunday, Feb. 19, 2017

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

Conventual Mass

Be Holy, for I the Lord, Your God, Am Holy

When Dylan Root, who killed nine people in Emmanuel AME church in Charleston, South Carolina in June, 2015, was arraigned, members of the victims' families delivered a powerful message of forgiveness.

A family representative of Ethel Lance, a seventy year old grandmother who was killed in the massacre, told Root, "I will never talk to her again, I will never be able to hold her again. But I forgive you and have mercy on your soul. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people, but I forgive you." There were others who also expressed their forgiveness in spite of the pain they felt, praying for God's mercy for him and that "you will change your ways in spite of what happened."ⁱ

When ten young Amish schoolgirls were killed by Charles Roberts in October, 2006, the Amish community did not cast blame, point fingers or try to retaliate in any way.

Instead, they reached out in compassion to the killer's family...

The afternoon of the shooting an Amish grandfather of one of the girls who was killed expressed his forgiveness. That same day Amish neighbors visited the Roberts family to comfort them. Amish mourners outnumbered non-Amish at Roberts' funeral.ⁱⁱ

These are examples of very ordinary people like you and me, who, caught in tragic circumstances, followed the gospel way, the call to holiness, the call to be like God.

Our first reading is taken from the law of holiness in Leviticus, a body of laws regarding ritual and moral conduct. The lives of the chosen people must reflect the holiness of God. The fundamental idea of holiness, whether attributed to God or people, was "otherness." While God is present in his creation, God also stands over and apart from it. This distinctiveness is to be reflected in worship and the conduct of God's people. This chapter of Leviticus calls for not only

an external purity but a moral uprightness as well.ⁱⁱⁱ

Any trace of hatred or ill-will towards a fellow Israelite is to be avoided. The passage ends with the most celebrated verse in Leviticus: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18b). A healthy love of self was the norm against which the love of one Israelite for another was to be measured. In the New Testament, this verse together with Deuteronomy 6:5 “Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength” became the summary of the entire Christian way of life.^{iv}

In the Sermon on the Mount, of which today’s gospel forms a part, Jesus speaks with authority. He has come to bring the Law to perfection: “You have heard it said ‘You shall not kill...but I say to you... You have heard it said ‘You shall not commit adultery. But I say to you...’” (Matthew 5:27ff). Now he comes to the demands of charity.^v

“An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” quoted in Leviticus sounds incredibly harsh. But it was a way of restraining individual revenge that led to escalation of endless retaliation. A slap could have brought down upon itself the revenge of murder. The *lex talionis*, as it was called, had already fallen into disuse by Jesus’ time, but its spirit often persists, even today in ways we think of and exact punishment from offenders.^{vi}

Jesus’ concern in his teaching is not with a penal or criminal justice code. His concern is with individuals. He asks his disciples never to return violence for violence, and he illustrates his teaching by four examples: “When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other to him as well”; “If anyone wants to go to the law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well”; “Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him two miles”; “Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn our back on one who wants to borrow.” Literally applied, these

examples could give rise not only to unreasonable behavior but at times to behavior full of serious consequences to others. What Jesus is teaching his disciples is a deliberate decision to act nonviolently and without retaliation even towards those who unjustly wrong us. This begins with an attitude of the heart, with our very thoughts. Jesus himself pointed out the importance of managing our thoughts and desires when he said “the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile” (Matthew 15:18).

What we heard in today’s gospel is addressed to each of us as a commandment of the Lord. It does not ask that we act with naivete, that we yield to injustice and violence, but that we be peacemakers in actions and words,^{vii} and that we find other ways of addressing such issues. Gandhi and Martin Luther King immediately come to mind as well as the work of Mother Teresa.

The story is told of a snake who heard the teaching of Jesus from a wandering preacher and immediately refused

all violence. He refused to bite any one. The local children discovering this began to beat him with sticks every day.

The snake was near death when the preacher returned and asked how he was doing. The snake told him of his heroic actions expecting to be praised. Instead, the preacher told him, "I told you not to bite. I didn't tell you not to hiss."^{viii}

The last part of the gospel gives the key to the interpretation of and the reason for the demands Jesus just mentioned. "You have heard that it was said: 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" Nowhere does the Law tell us to hate our enemies. It is possible it was a saying current in Jesus' time, and in Aramaic "hate" does not have the strong meaning it has for us.^{ix}

"But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Jesus rejects the distinction between "them and us." But he goes further, speaking of enemies we must love and persecutors for whom we must pray.^x This is different from the way of a fallen world whose dictum is

“Don’t get mad, get even.” This is the love that makes us children of the Father who makes his rain, that is his love, fall on the just and unjust alike. And the unjust in our lives may not be someone who tries to kill us but someone we find difficult in our day to day contact. We cannot achieve this love of which Christ speaks on our own but it is a love, a gift God gladly bestows on those who sincerely want to follow Christ. It is a gift that this world so sorely needs. This was the gospel teaching the members of the church in Charleston, South Carolina and the members of the Amish community in Lancaster, Pa. not only understood but witnessed to by their words and actions, by their lives..

ⁱ <http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2015/06/families-charleston-shoot...>

ⁱⁱ <http://lancasterpa.com/amish/amish-forgiveness/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Roland J. Foley, *Footprints On the Mountain* (N.Y., Paulist Press, 1994) 167

^{iv} Roland J. Foley, 167

^v *Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year, v.4* (Collegeville, Minn., The Liturgical Press, 1992) 67

^{vi} *Days of the Lord*, 67

^{vii} *Days of the Lord*, 67, 68

^{viii} John Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers, Year A* (Collegeville, Minn., Liturgical Press, 2004) 85

^{ix} *Days of the Lord*, 68

^x *Days of the Lord*, 68