

January 20, 2011

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading: Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 3:16-23

Gospel Reading: Matthew 5:38-48

Homilist: Deacon Mike Mocek

There is a story about a truck driver who pulled up to a roadside diner late one night for a little rest and food. As he was eating, three rough-looking motorcycle riders roared into the parking lot and went inside. They spied the truck driver eating quietly at the bar and decided to have some fun, as they called it, at his expense. They sat on either side of the truck driver and began harassing him. One shook salt and pepper over his head. One picked up his pie and dropped it on the floor. The third knocked over his coffee, spilling it on his trousers. The truck driver never said a word. He just got up, paid his bill, and left. As he walked out the door, the motorcyclists howled with laughter and one said, "That dude sure isn't much of a fighter." A nearby waiter heard this comment as he was looking out a window and replied, "He isn't much of a driver either. He just ran over three motorcycles." Now I have to admit that upon hearing that story, my first reaction was, "Yes! The jerks got exactly what they deserved." And I suspect many of you feel the same way. But the truck driver's revenge does not track with what Jesus is teaching us in today's Gospel.

There is another story, and this one is true, about Don Samuel Ruiz, bishop of the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas in southern Mexico from 1960 to 2000. Don Samuel died this past January at the age of 86. His 40-year tenure as bishop was distinguished by his pref-

erence for the poor and oppressed, his defense of human rights, his ecumenical involvement with all religions, and his empowerment of the Indigenous people of his diocese. He is also renowned for mediating the conflict between Zapatista rebels and the Mexican government in the 1990s, actions for which he received many death threats. Several years ago, Don Samuel was interviewed by Sister Barbara Reid, a respected theologian, professor, and university administrator. She asked about all the threats on his life. How could he live the teaching of Jesus Christ to love his enemies when so many hated him and sought to do him harm? His simple reply was, "I have no enemies." Seeing his interviewer's look of confusion, he added, "There are some who want to make themselves enemy to me but I have no enemies." Don Samuel Ruiz truly embodied the message of today's Gospel.

Our Gospel readings for the past three Sundays have been taken from Matthew's account of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. That sequence continues today, for the next two Sundays, and through the Gospel reading on Ash Wednesday. Early in this sermon, Jesus makes it clear that he has come not to abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfill them. His teachings begin with the Beatitudes and continue with subjects of anger, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, enemies, almsgiving, prayer, fasting, money, false prophets, and The Golden Rule. The Sermon on the Mount is a very beautiful reading of Holy Scripture, but at the same time, it is very, very challenging. Jesus challenges us to holiness and reminds us that following Him means that we cannot stop at the Ten Commandments. We have to go beyond the Commandments

and strive to live our lives in harmony with His teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.

Of all these teachings, none in my opinion are more difficult or more challenging than the two we heard today. First, Jesus recalls the Old Testament law on retaliation, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” taken from the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. That rule continues to be invoked by many today to justify acts of retaliation, including the death penalty. Such misuse fails to recognize that the original intent of the law was as much to place limits on acts of retribution and curtail cycles of violence as it was to prescribe punishment. As good as it might have felt momentarily to the truck driver, the destruction of three motorcycles cannot be justified as legitimate pay-back for a piece of pie, a cup of coffee, and even an assault of humiliation. But Jesus Christ is now telling us to go further – turn the other cheek, hand over your cloak as well as your tunic, and go for two miles when pressed into service for one. We must realize, however, that Jesus is not teaching us to let evildoers abuse us freely and without consequence. We are called to respond to evildoers by confronting them without violence rather than by retaliating through the same means. Break the cycle of violence and open possibilities for repentance, reconciliation, and forgiveness.

As if that alone is not hard enough, we move on to the second teaching of today’s Gospel – love your enemies. The 19th Century Irish writer, Oscar Wilde, is supposed to have said, “Always love your enemies. Nothing annoys them more.” But I don’t think that is exactly

what Jesus Christ had in mind. Jesus teaches that our love must extend beyond our families, beyond our neighbors, and even beyond those who think and act as we do. Our love must reach to those who disagree with us, to those who hate us, and, like Don Samuel Ruiz, even to those who desire to do us harm. We are to set no bounds on our love just as God sets no bounds on God’s divine love.

This is not easy and it is certainly not for the cowardly. It takes great strength and courage to “turn the other cheek” and to “love our enemies.” But this is our call to holiness. It is our call to “be perfect just as our heavenly Father is perfect.” Jesus knows we cannot achieve perfection in this life but He is calling on us to always reach for that perfection through nonviolence, forgiveness, and loving our enemies.