

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson
19th February 2023 - 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings (Year A): 1st: Leviticus 19:1-2,17-18. 2nd: 1 Corinthians 3:16-23. **Gospel:** Matthew 5:38-48

Aggression unfortunately is a natural human instinctive reaction to difficult situations. Because of widespread news media and the various forms of instant communication today, we seem to hear of rage, violence, and aggression more and more. Rage and anger writ large, and that sadly often turning more into maiming or killing.

Jesus' teaching today tells us that if we respond to aggression with more aggression, we risk creating an endless cycle of violence. Violence harms our unity, setting one person against another and making cooperation impossible.

Jesus teaches that God's love extends to everyone, and that includes people we might regard as our enemies, and people we have excluded from our circle of friends. Loving our enemies sounds like an impossible goal – we often struggle to be in the same room as them.

Jesus is trying to help us see the world a little more as God sees it. In his instruction on non-violence Jesus is giving us a way out.

Bishop Robert Barron, in 'Catholicism' does give three examples of resistance, and turning the other cheek. He does say that in the society of Jesus' time, people would never have used the left hand for any form of social interaction, since it was considered unclean. Thus if someone strikes you on the right cheek, he is hitting you with the back of his hand, and this was the manner in which one would strike a slave or a child or social inferior. In the face of this kind of violence Jesus is recommending neither fighting back nor fleeing, but rather standing your ground.

To turn the *other* cheek is to prevent him from hitting you the same way. It is not to run or acquiesce, but rather to signal to the aggressor that you refuse to accept the set of assumptions that have made his aggression possible. It is to show that you are occupying a different moral space.

Bp. Barron does give three contemporary dynamics to illustrate. Some of you have seen or heard them before but worth reflecting on. 1st is Mother Teresa of Calcutta who went with a small child to the local baker and begged some bread for the hungry lad. The baker spat full in Mother's face. Undaunted she calmly replied, "Thank you for that gift to me, do you have anything for the child?"

Desmond Tutu, when he was a young priest in Johannesburg, was making his way along a wooden sidewalk, raised above the muddy street. He came to a narrow section of the sidewalk and was met by a white man coming from the other direction. The man said to Tutu: "Get off the sidewalk; I don't make way for gorillas." Tutu stepped aside, gestured broadly, and responded "I do!"

Pope St John Paul II making his first visit back to Poland in 1979, within months of his election went to Victory Square in Warsaw to celebrate Mass to hundreds of thousands of people and the entire Polish Communist Government, who really hadn't wanted him to return. During his homily the pope spoke of God, of freedom, and of human rights - all topics frowned upon by the Communist regime.

As he preached, the people began to chant "we want God, we want God, we want God" The pope continued and the chant went on and did not stop for over an astonishing 15 minutes.

It is said that during the demonstration of the people's will, John Paul turned towards the Polish government officials and gestured, as if to say "Do you hear?" Later within a few years the entire Soviet Communist empire disintegrated with hardly a shot fired.

In all three cases an offended person responded, neither with counterviolence nor with flight, but rather with a provocative gesture meant to draw the aggressor into a new spiritual consciousness.

All the readings today pick up the fact that God's Holy Spirit is in each person, and we are all deserving of compassion and love.

Jesus left us with a code for life, a lifestyle that seems contrary to much of the thinking and action in mainstream society.

It is a lifestyle he lived out himself where everybody is to be shown love and respect. Jesus loved his enemies, forgave those who mocked, scourged and crucified him. We could say that the Sermon on the Mount predisposes us to live a life of self-giving, a good lead into Lent, in imitation of Christ.

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