

7th Sunday of Ordinary Time “What Turning the Other Cheek Looks Like”

Fr. Frank Schuster

On Sunday October 31, 2010 in Iraq, a young woman named Raghada al-Wafi ran to her local church with some wonderful news to share with Fr. Abdulla, the priest who had married her and her husband. She was going to have a baby. She asked Fr. Abdulla for a blessing and with a big smile he was pleased to give it. This was one of the last moments of their lives. Moments later, Fr. Abdulla, Raghada, and her unborn child were slaughtered. They were among the Catholic faithful killed by terrorists at a Chaldean Catholic Church in Bagdad on the eve of the celebration of All Saints. The name of the church is “Our Lady of Salvation”.

In a horrific attack, gunmen stormed into the church and accused the Christians of being infidels. They began to randomly fire their weapons at them. Although dozens of worshippers sought sanctuary in the church sacristy, many others weren't so lucky. The siege lasted four hours. When it was over, more than fifty Iraqi Catholics had been killed, including two priests. It was one of the deadliest attacks on Christians in Iraq up to that point in their history.

How did the Catholic Community of Bagdad respond to this unjust tragedy? The next Sunday, the Church was full. Think about that for a moment. The Church was full. When asked by a reporter, one of the parishioners put it so simply and so beautifully. He said that he returned because the week before he hadn't finished his prayers. “I need to finish them”, he said. A woman with a bandage around her knee told a reporter, "We forgive them. We're not afraid. They gave us blood and we give them forgiveness."

My friends, we perhaps have Jesus' most difficult teaching in the Gospel today. He tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father. Jesus tells us that we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us because God makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. How is this fair? How is this perfect? How are we “to be perfect as God is perfect”?

In my opinion, it boils down to the meaning of life Jesus offers us time and time again. And it is a message that should help guide us in our personal lives as well as how to deal with the world we live in. 1 John chapter 4:16, God is love. Genesis, chapter 1:26-27 we are made in the image and likeness of this God who is love. What are we called to be then? We are called to be a people who love as God loves. There are 613 commandments in the Torah. Jesus sums them up with the commandment to love God and neighbor. St. Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 13 says at the end of the day, only three things matter, faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love.

God's love is so perfect that no matter how we respond to his love, he continues to love us stubbornly, and calls us to do the same. Jesus says, “If you love only those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not pagans do the same?”

As we make our journey towards salvation, a fundamental truth comes to light here. A person's character isn't defined by how we handle the good things in life. A person's character is defined by how we handle the bad things in life. And because the sun shines on the good and bad alike, we have plenty of opportunities in life to demonstrate our character in the face of injustice.

Does this mean becoming a doormat? No, quite the opposite. However, we do have to define what love means when dealing with our enemies. Love in this context isn't about having warm and fuzzy feelings about the people who persecute us. Nor does it mean avoiding tough situations, quite the opposite. Love means choosing to want our persecutor's salvation, so much so that we pray for their salvation every day and sometimes take risks to demonstrate this love by taking the high road in our dealings with frustrating people, hopefully bringing them closer to a relationship with God by our example. This is of course a lot easier said than done, I get it. However, it is important for our spiritual health.

You see, when confronted with an adversary, there are two instincts that we humans have. Those instincts are to fight or flight. Both are ultimately unhelpful. Both will ultimately perpetuate violence. Jesus offers a third approach, turn the cheek. When we turn the cheek, we are not avoiding the confrontation, we are not fleeing the scene, nor are we returning violence with violence. By turning the cheek, we demonstrate that we are not going to sink to our adversary's level of violent behavior, and by not fleeing the scene we are demonstrating to our persecutor what just behavior looks like in contrast to unjust behavior.

What does this look like? A legend about Mother Teresa that I am told is a true story: One day, Mother Teresa took a starving little girl's hand and led her to a store for some bread. Mother Teresa begged on behalf of the little girl for some bread. What happened next? The owner of the store looked squarely into Mother Teresa's eyes and then spit on her. Unshaken, Mother Teresa wiped off the spit and looked squarely back into the store owner's eyes and said, "Thank you for the gift. Can you now give something to this starving girl?"

You can imagine the scene and the power of her words. You can imagine the shame the store owner must have felt. Mother Teresa didn't spit at the man in return (our instinct to fight) nor did she flee the scene (our instinct for flight). She stood courageously in the face of her persecutor with the hopes that he would understand why his behavior was unjust, with the hopes that his heart would be changed. In this instance, the shop owner's heart was changed and he gave the little starving girl some bread to eat.

Another true story, I traveled to Ireland with my parents several years ago. In our time in Northern Ireland, we visited a museum in the town of Derry. The town is called Derry by the Catholics and Londonderry by the Protestants. Derry was a hot spot for the troubles between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland and the infamous location of the Sunday Bloody Sunday massacre. Our tour guide in the museum shared with me that his father died in the troubles. I asked him how he and his family have coped with this tragedy. He told me something

remarkable. He said that he and his family have learned over the years that the best vengeance you can ever inflict on your enemy is to forgive them. How's that for wisdom? I find myself chewing on his words over the years, the best vengeance you can ever inflict on your enemy is to forgive them. The interesting part of this story is that I don't know whether our tour guide was Catholic or Protestant. The wisdom he shared with me holds true for anyone who would claim to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Is it hard to take the higher road with people who we are frustrated with? Yup. Will taking the higher road always work? Nope. Is it still the right thing to do? Yes. This isn't an easy Gospel reading, but nothing about being a disciple of Jesus is meant to be easy. And so my friends, we can ask ourselves who are the people in our lives we feel persecuted by? Who are the bullies at school, at work, and in society? What are all the non-violent ways we can help them see the injustice they inflict on others? Can we resist the temptation to fight or flight and pick the third way Jesus invites us to consider? Who are the people whose salvation we need to pray for daily? When we return injustice with love, even tough love, we define our character in the eyes of God. Despite our many flaws, if we follow Jesus' example we become more perfect like our heavenly Father who is perfect.