

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
February 22 & 23, 2014

Rev. Fred Daley
All Saints Church, Syr., NY

“But I say to you...”

One day a father had to go away on business for three or four days and it was the first time he'd ever had to leave his young family. He was a bit nervous about it, so the night before he left, he sat down with his oldest son Chris, who was nine, and said: “When I'm away I want you to think about what I would normally do around the house and you can do it for me.” He had in mind, of course, clearing the kitchen table, wiping with dishes, taking out the garbage and other normal chores.

On his return home, he asked his wife what his son had done. “Well,” she said, “it was very strange. Right after breakfast he made himself another cup of coffee, went into the living room, put on some loud music, and read the newspaper for the next half hour!”

...the father was left wondering whether his son had obeyed him a bit too accurately...!

This is the third Sunday that our Gospel reading is taken from the Sermon on the Mount: Chapters 5, 6 & 7 of Matthew. This Sermon on the Mount is the heart, the core, a snapshot of what Jesus' whole mission is all about. In this Sermon, Jesus instructs us: ‘watch..., observed what God is doing and then do the same yourselves. If you do this, you will be salt and light for the world!’

In the Sermon, Jesus reflects on the moral law handed down from the ancestors and he says: ‘Yes, you must not only follow the law – but you must go much deeper if you really want to see and observe what God is doing and to then do it yourselves. So: what Jesus is saying is that we must move beyond the superficial letter of the law..., we must move beyond business as usual..., the way things have *always* been done..., and get to the heart — the core — we must get to the essentials.

Yes, it's messy, it's painful, it can be controversial, and even divisive..., but ultimately we begin to see the way God sees and then we can begin to do what God does..., and, little-by-little, our lives get better, our families and communities get better and, ultimately, our world gets better!

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In the Sermon, Jesus then gets very specific and in doing so, he turns the conventional moral law upside-down. In his first specific teaching in today's Gospel, Jesus said to his disciples: “You have heard that it was said: ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth...’ As savage as this law, introduced in Leviticus, sounds to us in the world today, it was actually a step to limit violence. Prior to this law, there was no limit to revenge: if a family member was killed, the offended family could kill the murderer's whole family ...or tribe. ‘An eye for an eye’ was merciful because it stopped the slaughter of whole families.

Then Jesus says: “*But I say to you: offer no resistance to evil!*”

What Jesus is teaching here, is that we cannot – as disciples – respond to violence with violence. Why? Because when we hurt or kill another person, we are hurting or killing a child of God and when we hurt or kill a child God, we are hurting or killing a sister or brother....

In today’s 2nd Reading, Paul reminds us of the sacredness of human life: he explains that each person is a Temple of God, the Spirit of God dwells in each person! Paul says: “The Temple of God, which you are, is holy.” We celebrate that beautiful truth when we welcome one another at the beginning of Mass with the word: ‘*Namaste*’ we acknowledge the Spark of the Divine in one another!

With Jesus, the awareness of God’s real presence moved from the tent, the building..., from the temple, the tabernacle..., to the person. Each one of us is the tent where God dwells..., the church building is a facility where we – “Temples of the Holy Spirit” – gather. We are living Tabernacles! Jesus makes it clear throughout the Gospels, that the *real presence* here at the Altar and in the Word and in the Tabernacle is incomplete... meaningless – in fact: scandalous – if we do not see God’s real presence in each person, each child of God, in the *real persons* here in this Assembly, and out there in the world. And yet, I don’t think that we really get it...

Think about this: if a deranged person came by All Saints tonight and sprayed graffiti on our church and perhaps broke some windows, there would be outrage, it would be in the headlines; but the many children – Temples of the Spirit right here in Syracuse – going to bed hungry tonight, or abused or without proper health-care who will wake-up Monday morning to go to inadequate schools, dodging violence in the streets and even in school hallways ... in the wealthiest nation in the world, goes on day after day without hardly a ripple..., a whimper..., “...business as usual.”

Brothers and sisters, the violence experienced in our relationships, our families, our streets and neighborhoods is just a microcosm of the global violence of war, and is an antithesis of everything Jesus taught and lived. “War,” as Pope Francis tells us, “is always a defeat for humanity.”

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My sisters and brothers, as disciples of Jesus, if we’re honest, we must admit that this core teaching of Jesus: that we are *forbidden* to use violence as a means to solve conflict, has been ignored by-and-large by Christians for at least the last 1500 years. As I’ve noted before (sadly), Christians have killed more Christians and others than any other religion in the world; from the Crusades to the Inquisition to colonization to the dropping of the atomic bomb and on and on....

Why don’t we get this point, this primary teaching of Jesus? There are many historical reasons for this which we don’t have time to go into in detail here: number one, in the year 312 with the Edict of Milan, Christianity became the established religion of the Roman empire, receiving land, money, power and prestige that then needed to be protected. Christianity became a civil religion – to this day compromising the Gospel for social acceptance, material benefit and security. Another reason

Jesus' teaching on nonviolence is ignored, involves a real misunderstanding of what Jesus is teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere. Christians have been terrified of this teaching on non-retaliation because we have been taught to interpret it as passive and idealistic advice, which makes us vulnerable in a hostile and aggressive world. Why wouldn't we be terrified: we've been taught to think that Jesus is teaching us to passively lay down and get run over! But as we're learning more and more from Scripture scholars today, this myth could not be further from the truth.

Using the three examples in today's Gospel: For a Jew in Imperial Palestine, to turn the other cheek, to stand naked in front of the courthouse or to carry a soldier's gear an extra mile, were bold acts of resistance – which we don't have time to get into in detail this morning – that were meant to change the balance of power from one of violence to one of nonviolence. Jesus is providing an alternative strategy to break the cycle of violence – using creative means to 'dis-arm' the enemy.

For Jesus, discipleship is more than a bland refusal to participate in violence. It is a new, creative and courageous way of acting. It sees into the hidden dynamics of imposed violence, exposes them and opens up other possibilities.

What mainline Christianity has missed through the centuries, St. Francis of Assisi and the Quakers and Dorothy Day with the Catholic Worker Movement and Thomas Merton and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Berrigan brothers understood deeply: seeing as God sees. The challenge for Christians today – and for us at All Saints Parish – is to join with other people of goodwill working creatively to develop nonviolent ways to break the cycle of violence while working to end injustice globally and locally, which is often the seed that blossoms into violence. But, as Dr. King reminded us so vividly: we better hurry-up, because the clock of mutually assured destruction is at one minute to midnight! We haven't got much time... Today we have a choice: nonviolence or nonexistence.

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But sometimes it seems so over-whelming: 'what can I do...?' Well, as disciples we are called to have the New York Times in one hand and the Gospels and the other. If we look at the history of instruments of violence, each escalation was always portrayed as a new step toward stopping the violence, but – in truth – just the opposite has occurred. We evolved from throwing stones to using clubs, to swords, to guns, to cannons, to bombs, to the nuclear age, and now: to lethal drones. Today, in Onondaga County, a person can get up in the morning, kiss his wife and children goodbye, drive from a Syracuse suburb to Hancock Field Airbase, push a few buttons on a screen, setting off a drone – that will hit a home in rural Afghanistan halfway around the world, perhaps killing an enemy soldier... and, perhaps, ...a civilian, along with their wives and children – and return home in time for a cocktail before dinner.

Our American Catholic Bishops and other Religious Leaders, have expressed to the White House, their grave reservations on the use of lethal drones. The Priests' Council of our Syracuse Diocese has planned four workshops to be held around the Diocese to address the question "What is the Moral Basis of our use of Lethal Drones." The Syracuse area workshop will be right here at All Saints, on Wednesday at 7 PM. Ed Kinane, a local peace activist, will make the case against the use of lethal drones. Gene Blackburn, from St. Paul's Parish in Rome, a former Director of the Electronics Reliability Division at Rome Air Force Base Research Laboratory, will make the case for the use of lethal drones. Marie Dennis, from Washington DC, co-president of *Pax Christi* International will present the Catholic social teaching on war and peace in relation to lethal drones. Coming Wednesday night and getting involved in this moral discussion is one answer to "What can we do?"

[I know this is too long for a homily – but surely The Sermon on the Mount was more than 10 minutes...!] I can't conclude without pointing out the second specific teaching in today's Gospel that turns the traditional moral law upside-down, and it flows from the first:

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said (fasten your seatbelt!): "You have heard it said: you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you: *love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you*"!

In a nutshell, the Greek word that Jesus uses here is *agape*: God's love is *agape* love which means: first, that God loves without conditions, like a parent loves their child unconditionally – no matter how the child screws up! The second meaning of *agape*, which is not so well-known, is that God loves without exceptions! God's love is without exceptions!

In the Jewish Law, "neighbor" was interpreted as blood relatives, maybe your next door neighbor – another Jew, the Jewish Community. But Jesus extends the understanding of "neighbor" to include every person and all people without exception. As disciples of Jesus, we are called even to love our enemies. We must love all people and each person without exception. If a parish is to be true to this teaching of Jesus, then: "All are welcome" – there are no insiders and outsiders. This is what we try to do here at All Saints. In faithfulness to our mission, our GLBT Task Force is offering a three-part series on "Understanding Transgender," beginning Tuesday. The format will be similar to the Series: "Gay & Catholic" offered several years ago. The first session will feature a panel of parents of transgender children, sharing their stories. The second session will bring together transgender sisters and brothers to share their stories and at the third session, an expert will help us to understand the reality of transgender. Flyers for both the Transgender and the Drone events are enclosed in the bulletin.

I'd like to conclude with a couple of lines from the book: Allies and Angels, written by Terri and Vince Cook, parents of a transgender child. They will be with us on Tuesday. Before I begin, I'd like to ask you to call to mind for a moment, a medical condition you or a loved one might have...

Terri states:

“Imagine being born with a medical condition that you could not control and you did nothing to cause. Many transgender people experience so much pain and difficulty that 41% attempt suicide. Imagine that rather than receiving empathy, support, compassion for your medical condition, you receive rejection, harassment, discrimination and acts of violence against you; and to top it off, imagine that there were no laws to protect you from this injustice. Sadly, because they are transgender, people are often treated harshly and denied the dignity and equality that each person deserves....”

Terri concludes:

“I’ve learned a lot over the past few years, because I had to learn.
My child’s life depended on it.”

I hope you can join us on Tuesday in the Bishop Harrison Center.

Amen!