

Sunday February 20, 2022
Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
Parishioner Reflection

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If someone were to ask you, “What is Christianity all about?” you could point to the readings of today. In the Gospel Jesus speaks about love - radical love - the kind of love that Jesus wants to be the defining quality of the Christian, a love that reflects God’s own love. It is a love that embraces not only those who love us, but those who are critical of us, who disagree with us, who may even be hostile and aggressive towards us. “Love your enemies,” Jesus urges us. “Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.”

How are we to understand this teaching? And how can we possibly live it?

We need to be careful in how we understand it. It is not an encouragement to be a passive victim of abuse. Rather I see it as a call to develop inner strength, to find an inner capacity to respond non-violently to the violence that may be directed towards us.

The reading from 1 Samuel gives us a good example of this kind of love. Saul sets out to kill David, but his violence is defused by David’s demonstration of good will and respect towards him. Even when David has the opportunity to kill Saul, he refuses. “Do not destroy him,” he urges his companions, “for who can raise a hand against the Lord’s anointed and be guiltless?” In spite of Saul’s behaviour, David honours the preciousness of Saul’s life.

What restraint, what strength of character David showed! His non-violent response to Saul’s aggression won the day. Saul’s heart was converted; he repented and was reconciled with David. David became a successful, well respected King who reigned for decades. Under his leadership the tribes of Israel were reunited and Jerusalem was restored.

David put his trust in God’s justice and mercy, trusting that God in turn would regard his own life as precious and rescue him from all tribulation. David’s inner strength came from his relationship with God. He knew he was beloved by God, chosen by God and anointed for a mission. We can picture David singing Psalm 103, praising God’s mercy and grace, as he danced before the tabernacle.

As St. Paul reminds us in his first letter to the Corinthians, we, also, are meant to “bear the image of the One in heaven.” Our spiritual journey is about becoming more and more like Christ, reflecting God’s own love and mercy in our world.

Today, more than ever, that witness of radical, God-like love is needed. Amidst the growing divisiveness, animosity, hateful speech and disrespectful action in

our culture, we are called to develop our capacity for radical, all-inclusive love. Humanly, this may seem impossible, but it is the path Jesus invites us to. By deepening our life of prayer, we can draw on God's grace to give us the inner strength to love. With God nothing is impossible.

There are some powerful examples of this kind of love in our world today. A few years ago I spent a month in Rwanda, a country that was devastated by a shocking genocide in 1994 in which thousands of people were killed. People were betrayed and killed by their neighbours and fellow-parishioners. After the fighting stopped, the perpetrators of the genocide and the survivors, those who had cowered in hiding and lost most of their family members, were still side by side. How could they possibly go forward? The country made a commitment to a process of truth and reconciliation, which involved grass-roots circles of truth-telling and respectful, compassionate listening. Decades later, and with much psychological support for people, the country is moving forward.

During my visit I heard about a service of reconciliation that was held in one of the parish churches. During the service, several people who had killed during the genocide confessed and expressed their contrition publicly, and those who had been victimized by those same people listened and offered forgiveness. The whole parish was present to witness and celebrate this profound reconciliation. It was the fruit of many months of meetings among these people, accompanied and supported by the parish priest. What a witness to Jesus' teaching to love your enemies and to forgive.

May their example encourage us as we strive in our own circles and situations to love even those who criticize and hurt us, drawing on God's grace through prayer, so that we, too, may be signs of God's love and mercy in our world.