

Epiphany 7

February 20, 2011

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in thine eyes, O Lord, our strength and redeemer. Amen

But I say to you, "Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

Have you ever asked yourself the question?

What the heck was Jesus thinking about when he told us to turn the other cheek?

This week in our staff meeting Fr. Graham just looked at us, shook his head and said *Jesus must have been having another bad day.....*

Given our gospel for this week, we must ask ourselves the questions.....Are Christians supposed to be doormats for the sake of our faith?

Should it say on our Christian calling cards, Wimps-R-US?

A simplistic reading of our Lord's words might indicate this approach.

At the same time though, we should remind ourselves that the gospels rarely show Jesus as a shy, retiring, milk-toast kind of fellow.

After all, this is the same fellow who ate with tax collectors, and fishermen; told the Pharisees and scribes they were hypocrites and going to hell....

He even made a whip out of leather cords and drove the money changers and merchants out of God's Temple.

He was as John's gospel reminds us the Word made flesh, God with us...the image of the living God.

We see Jesus in the gospels as the defender of the poor, the downtrodden, the maligned, and mistreated.

You may as well call him "Captain Jerusalem".

Even a cursory reading of the Gospels show Jesus was not a wimp.

So what are we to make of these words from our Gospel lesson?

Certainly the words that Jesus utters are not easy ones to follow in this morning's lesson.

Most of us come pre-equipped with a fight or flight response to situations like the ones we hear about in the gospel.

Those primitive responses go a long way back in our genetic code and they are designed to help ensure the survival of our species. But our job as followers of Christ is (according to the gospel) to stay close to confrontation and conflict.

We are not to fight or flee in order that we may follow the example of Jesus and show the power of God's love to overcome all things; bodily assault, legal prosecution, or even kidnapping.

And while it is easier and safer to stay close to those whom we already know and for whom we already care, Jesus addresses this question as well.

As easy as it is to remain in relationship with those who we already know and love.....

Jesus tells us that we don't get credit for working at those relationships....

It's the ones with strangers, the relationships with those who we do not know or maybe don't like - or who don't like us- that count in the Kingdom of God.

Now I know this sounds hard, probably impossible to most of us, but that is because we are thinking of it in our practical, human terms.

None of what Jesus' asks is possible without the gift of God's love....

As our collect states

O Lord you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing; send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love, the true bond of peace and of all virtue, without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you.

It is only by this most amazing gift, delivered by the Holy Spirit, that we can hope to overcome our automatic response to fight or flight from conflict and confrontation.

And this type of love is not some kind of warm, fuzzy feeling of good you will see on soap operas like “One Life to Live”.

This is the type of powerful love that led Gandhi in his protests in India against the British and Martin Luther King Jr., in our own country, to confront the evil of segregation.

But you may ask: “Isn’t it possible to twist this sort of logic?”

Isn’t it possible that we put ourselves in harm’s way and risk embarrassment, injury, or even death?

Yes of course, those things are possible, even quite probable, but remember that is exactly the same risk our God took in sending Jesus for us.

That is exactly what Jesus did when he allowed himself to be beaten, accused, and crucified.

God gives us the same access to that type of relationship...and while it has risks in human life...

It gives us all the opportunity, I believe, to bask in a glow of a love so powerful that even death cannot contain it....

But this is not, I readily admit, an easy reading, my friends.

And because this reading goes against our own self-interest, we need to remind ourselves that when we pick up the cross to follow Christ

We are called to be advocates for those who have no voice in our society.....who have no power, influence, wealth, or reputation.

Being perfect is treating “the evil and the good” and “the righteous and unrighteous” as God treats them, providing them with the same opportunity to live as everyone else.

As a friend of mine once wrote, “our witness as Christians is not true and authentic if our actions only preserve ourselves. Our witness is to be given in actions that show that all people know the benefits of the love of God”.

This is difficult because it forces us to move ourselves out of the center of the relationship; our center is focused on another, we are asked to submit—not told, or coerced—to the amazing love of God so that God’s love can put to death our selfish ways.

We are only ever safe in the love of God.

We speak the truth that God loves all people, that God makes the necessities of life available to all—both evil and good, righteous and unrighteous—that retribution is never the way to show the justice of God.

So are we to be doormats? Wimps for Christ? Are we to meekly submit to the persecution of this world and our enemies?

To borrow a phrase from St. Paul: Heck No.

We are to be people who courageously seek in their own life to show this world the power of God's transforming love, to give a voice to the voiceless and justice for those who long to be free.

O Lord you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing....Help us Lord to have human lives that are truly worth something.....AMEN