

February 19, 2023
Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 5:38-48

Jesus said to his disciples: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one to him as well. If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him for two miles. Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Background:

Today's Gospel continues Jesus' instruction to his disciples on the Torah. He continues to use the familiar method of teaching by first quoting from what is familiar and then adding his instruction.

This group of teachings began with Jesus' statement: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." (Matthew 5:17) Perhaps Jesus is responding to those who criticized him for not being faithful to their traditions. His response here is showing that he and his disciples are faithful to their tradition and even going beyond what was being taught by the scribes and the Pharisees.

In today's Gospel Jesus begins by citing one of the oldest laws in the world, "an eye for eye." It first appears in the Code of Hammurabi who reigned in Babylon between 2285 and 2242 BC. It appears three times in the Hebrew Scriptures. "If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth... (Exodus 21:23-25) "Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; ... (Leviticus 24:19-20) "Show no pity; life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, ... (Deuteronomy 19:21)

While the exhortation may sound brutal to the modern ear, it was an attempt to introduce a mercy, by placing limits on the vengeance. It was not a law that was intended for private use, one person against another, but for a judge when needing to assign a penalty.

Jesus' teaching here goes even further than limiting acts of revenge. His teaching asks the disciples to humbly submit to being publicly embarrassed by another, and show that person kindness. To be struck on the right cheek implies that the person has used their left hand, the one reserved for toilet acts. Turning your cheek allows the person to strike again without confrontation.

The vast majority of people only had two garments. An inner garment, their tunic, and their outer garment, the cloak. The cloak was also used at night as a kind of bedroll to keep one warm. If one demanded the tunic in a pledge and one also gave them their cloak, they were left naked. Again, a very embarrassing situation.

Jesus also draws on the reality that Roman soldiers could require people to carry their gear for a mile. Many of those soldiers were the people's countrymen who had become soldiers for Rome, and they could now ask their fellow Jews to carry their gear for them. For the common person, they were being asked to carry the gear of their countryman who was now working to enforce the laws of a foreign power. Another very difficult and embarrassing position for the disciple of Jesus. Jesus is asking his disciples not only to place strict limits on acts of violence and revenge, but to go to extreme lengths to treat others with respect and compassion.

Reflection Questions:

1. Who are the people who you admire for their ability to maintain a peaceful demeanor in difficult situations?
2. Who are the people around you who seem to be able to work with difficult personalities?
3. Do you try to learn from them, or just admire their ability?
4. What happens within you when you encounter anger, jealousy, disrespect, and prejudice? What helps you to transform these kinds of situations?
5. What effect does hardship and suffering have on you? When is it transforming? When does it lead to some form of self-indulgence?
6. Having heard Jesus' teaching in this Gospel, can you talk to God about whatever it is that you would like to say to him in reply.

The Gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fscclalledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click there will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the readings for February 19, 2023, the Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them:
Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.
"You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart.
Though you may have to reprove your fellow citizen, do not incur sin because of him.
Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against any of your people.
You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."

*The Lord is kind and merciful.
Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all my being, bless his holy name; forget not all his benefits.
He pardons all your iniquities, heals all your ills.
He redeems your life from destruction, crowns you with kindness and compassion.
Merciful and gracious is the Lord, slow to anger and abounding in kindness.
Not according to our sins does he deal with us, nor does he requite us according to our crimes.
As far as the east is from the west, so far has he put our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.*

Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for the temple of God, which you are, is holy. If any one among you considers himself wise in this age, let him become a fool, so as to become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God, for it is written: God catches the wise in their own ruses, and again: The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain. So let no one boast about human beings, for everything belongs to you, Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or the present or the future: all belong to you, and you to Christ, and Christ to God.

Jesus said to his disciples: "You have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one as well. If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand over your cloak as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go for two miles. Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow. "You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. If you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Excerpts from Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18; Psalm 103:1-4, 8, 10-13; 1 Corinthians 3:16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

From Joe:

Friends,

Here are the Gospel background and reflection questions for February 19th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. The Gospel from Matthew continues where the long one from last week left off, with the two remaining sections from this part of the Sermon on the Mount. "You have heard, an eye for an eye... I say to you, when someone strikes your right cheek, turn the other as well." "You have heard, love your neighbor and hate your enemy. I say, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you."

The other readings also have references to not bearing hatred or revenge, loving your neighbor, not incurring sin, and remaining holy and compassionate. In the first reading, from Leviticus, the Lord instructs Moses to tell his people, "Be holy. Do not bear hatred. Love your neighbor as yourself." Psalm 103 proclaims, "Bless the Lord; forget not his benefits. He has compassion on those who fear him." The second reading is again from the first letter to the Corinthians, where Paul writes, "You are the temple of God; you are holy. The Spirit dwells in you."

Last week Jesus taught: "I have come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it." He gave four teachings, dealing with killing, adultery, divorce, and false oaths. He said it is similarly wrong to act out in anger, even when no one is killed, and wrong to lust, even when no adultery is committed. And instead of swearing oaths, "let your 'Yes' mean 'Yes,' and your 'No' mean 'No.'" Today we get the last two of these six teachings. Like last week, Jesus first refers to Old Testament standards for dealing with situations, and then he takes them further and sets new standards. The old "an eye for an eye" now becomes "turn the other cheek" if someone strikes you. The old "love your neighbor, hate your enemy" now becomes "love your enemies too," or you are no better than tax collectors and pagans. Ultimately, the point of these higher standards is "be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect."