

Homily for Sunday, Feb. 20, 2022 – Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time



I can see, when the Church reworked the lectionary in the early 1960s, why they gave us that first reading from the Book of Samuel and that gospel passage from Luke to be proclaimed on the same Sunday; they mesh so well together. They also happen to be two of the most challenging pieces of Scripture to live up to, at least in my own life.

Let's look at Samuel and Luke and see where they may be challenging us to go, even if we have to go there kicking and screaming. The Book of Samuel recalls events around 1,000 B.C. Up until then, our forerunners in faith, the Jewish people were led by judges. These judges

were to rule the people by first reminding themselves that God is the ultimate ruler, the ultimate judge. If they stayed close to God, they were assured of God's guidance and protection. However, the Jewish people pressured the prophet Samuel, the last judge, to anoint a king because all the other nations around them had kings. Looking around they thought the grass was greener on the other side of the fence. Against his better judgment, Samuel anoints Saul as Israel's first king. Saul was not God's choice, nor was he Samuel's choice. He was made king because the Jews wanted an earthly king, like everyone else had, over and against a spiritual king. Saul, Israel's first king, proved to be a disaster. Saul suffered from depression, paranoia and, worst of all, jealousy. He was jealous of the teenager, David, who slew the giant, Goliath, and became a national hero almost overnight. There was no way, as king, he was going to share the limelight with a mere teenage. So, on many occasions he tried to kill David.

Today's story, from the Book of Samuel, is time for revenge. Or, is it? Now the tables are turned. At an encampment, King Saul is asleep with his sword by his head. David tiptoes into camp, picks up Saul's sword, and has the opportunity to exact revenge by killing the king. But, he doesn't do it. He will not lower himself to the king's standards. Instead, he responds to a higher call and spares the king's life. From a safe distance, David waves the king's sword in the air and says, "Hey, King! Looking for this?" He continues, ***"As your life was precious today in my sight, so may my life be precious in the sight of the Lord."*** In other words, if I want God to show mercy on me, I must show

mercy to others, even if in my mind they don't deserve it. I am going to live by what God is calling me to and not simply by the standards of the world.

This is where the David and Saul story meshes so well with today's gospel passage. Jesus is nobody's fool. He was well aware of the world he lived in and well aware of the world we live in. It is basically a tit-for-tat kind of world. In that kind of a world, if I deem you as my enemy, I am justified in hating you. After all, you probably started the conflict and did something that deserves the title "enemy." My violence is justified because you initiated the aggression. What's wrong with that thinking? What's wrong is that we have just entered the spiral of violence. One wrong, prompts another wrong; one act of violence, prompts another act of violence, and so on. There's no end to the spiral of violence. It starts in the **world of reaction**. In the world of reaction, I only give you what you give me. You hate me; I'll hate you. You strike my cheek, I'll strike yours. You take my coat; I'll wrestle you to the ground until I got yours. You take my goods; I'll take yours. You snub me at the Sign of Peace during Mass; you'll be driving home with four flat tires. That's how the world of reaction works. Jesus says we are capable of more. What is more, what is beyond the world of reaction, is the **world of response**. You hate me; I'll do my best to love you. You curse me; I'll pray for you. You strike my cheek; I'll offer you the other one. You take my coat; I'll give you my shirt as well. That's what the power of response is like. When you respond rather than simply react, you are drawing from a much deeper place within you than the knee-jerk reactions at the surface. Sinners draw their life from the world of reaction. But what about you and I who are children of God, sons and daughters of divine reality? Where do we draw our life from?

Though he was fully human, if there was one thing that distinguished Jesus from any other person that has ever lived it's this—he never reacted; he always responded. When he is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane swords are drawn. Jesus tells them to put their swords away because ***"If you live by the sword, you'll assuredly die by the sword...don't you know that I can appeal to my Father and he would send 12 legions of angels to defend me?"*** By not falling into the pit of reaction, but by remaining sovereignly free to respond from a place of love, Jesus entered more deeply into the power of God. He could extend love even to those who were violently persecuting him.

So, if you love only those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. Even those not connected to God do that much for each other. All that is, is the tit-for-tat world of reaction. If you lend only to those whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even Visa and Master Charge will do that much at 22% interest rate. Even those not connected to God will do that much for each

other. But what about you who are connected to God? If you are connected to God, something more is expected of you. You know something those not connected to God don't know. You know how to respond even though everyone around you is forcing you into the pit of reaction. Just watch the 6 o'clock news or read the newspaper; it's almost full of people reacting.

If these Scripture stories didn't challenge me enough, here's a story that does. Gurdjieff was a spiritual master who lived about 100 years ago. He said, "If you want to understand human behavior, don't start with psychology; start with mechanics. Why? Because Gurdjieff thought that we were on a low level of consciousness; we're just totally reactive.

Gurdjieff used to have a spiritual community in the early 1900s. In the spiritual community of Gurdjieff which he led in France, an old man lived there who was the personification of difficulty, irritable, messy, fighting with everyone, unwilling to clean up or help at all, and no one got along with him. Finally, after many frustrating months of trying to stay with the group, the old man left for Paris. Gurdjieff quickly followed him and tried to convince him to return. But it had been too hard, and the old man said, "No!" At last Gurdjieff offered the old man a big monthly stipend if only he'd return. How could he refuse? When he returned everyone was aghast. And on learning that he was being paid, while they were being charged a lot to be there, the community was up in arms. Gurdjieff called them together and after hearing their complaints, he laughed and explained: "This man is like yeast for bread. Without him you would never really learn about anger, irritability, patience, and compassion. That's why you pay me, and that's why I hire him!"

True power within you is the power of the divine, and the power of the divine is the power to respond, not react. It was the power working within David when he had the chance to kill Saul but chose not to. It was the power working within Jesus when he could have countered the violence towards him with his own form of violence but chose not to. It is the same power within you and me.

Fr. Phil