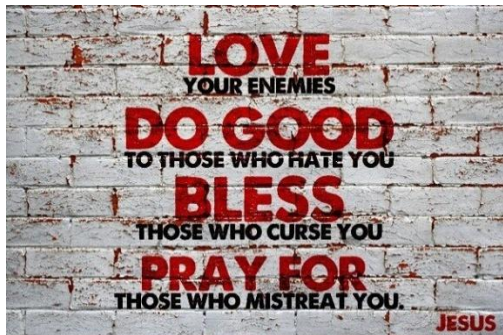


Homily – February 23rd, 2025 – 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time



Our starting point in anything, especially in life, is so important. Experts say that 80% of our personality is formed by the time we are five years old. That's probably why therapists are so interested in our childhood or the household we grew up in. That was our starting point, and it was so formative. Coincidentally, 80% of your image of God has to do with parental imagery. If your parents were punitive, cold, distant, and just waiting for you to screw up, it's likely you imagined God in the same way. Hopefully you had loving and caring parents who introduced you to a loving and caring God. But even if we got off to a bad start in life, our faith tells us that not all is lost. God's grace can, and often does, overcome even the greatest human shortcomings. I feel God's grace, most powerfully, when life falls apart and my own efforts can't put it back together again. Failure and disappointment become the very cracks through which God's light of grace shines through.

Starting points are important because they put us on a trajectory in life.

Theologically, if your starting point is that you are a sinner, you'll track in a certain way. If your starting point, your fundamental identity, is that you are a child of God who happens to sin, your trajectory will be very different. Or, as Jesus says, "If you think you're a bad tree, you'll produce bad fruit. But, if you know you are a good tree, you'll produce good fruit" (Mt. 7:17).

Our fundamental problem in the spiritual life is not sin *per se* but forgetfulness. We forget who we most truly are and identify with lesser dimensions of ourself. This gets us into all kinds of trouble. Taking the high road, always doing the right thing, constantly moving in the world as a child of God, instead of a sinner, is not easy. Without the grace of God, I'm going to say it's impossible.

Our first reading took place around 1,000 years before the birth of Jesus and centers around David before he became King David. Israel, at that time, was looking around at other nations and decided they no longer wanted to be ruled by spiritual leaders like prophets and judges, but instead by a secular ruler, a king, like all the other nations around them. They pressured the last judge, Samuel, to anoint Saul as king. Samuel didn't think this was a good idea, but to appease the people he did it. Since Saul was anointed, he was seen as God's choice much like kings and queens were considered divinely chosen. However, Saul was paranoid, narcissistic, arrogant, and overall, a terrible king (You thought I was talking about Trump, didn't you?). To make things worse, he was jealous of the upstart teenager named David who gained a name for himself by slaying the giant, Goliath. The jealousy was so bad that Saul tried to kill David on many occasions.

In today's story the tables are turned. David and his friend Abishai sneak into Saul's army camp while everyone is sleeping. Standing over the sleeping king, Abishai offers to kill Saul with one strike of Saul's own spear. But David will not allow his friend to do it. Instead of killing Saul, they steal Saul's spear, a jar of water, and a bag of Doritos. David won't lower himself to Saul's level. David will not take Saul's life even though Saul has been trying to kill David for the longest

time. He won't take revenge for two reasons. Firstly, although Saul is a dictator he is, in the mind of David, chosen by God to be Israel's first king. David said, ***"I won't raise my hand against the Lord's anointed."*** And the second reason David won't kill Saul is because David knows that if he is ever to seek God's mercy for his own life, he must first show mercy to others, including Saul. David takes the high, moral road instead of the easier road of "teaching someone a lesson they will never forget!" David remembers, even in the heat of the moment, who he is. He's a child of God, and he remembers that Saul—the guy hellbent on destroying him—is also a child of God. His witness to mercy, over and against revenge, was enough to change Saul's heart. Saul ended up saying, ***"Blessed be you, my son David! You could have killed me, but you didn't. You will do many things and succeed in them."***

Likewise, Jesus invites us to take the high road, the road less traveled, even and especially when those around us are pressuring us to take the common road. When we make ourselves the self-appointed arbiters of what is right, what is just, what is fair, we end up dismissing God who as Jesus says, ***"is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked."*** When we try too hard to push for what we think is fair and just--according to our own standards--the swords come out and God's grace goes out the window.

While we push for fairness and justice, we also have to realize that we are alive not because of God's justice but because of God's mercy. Mercy is the final breakdown of justice. When all else fades away, only the mercy of God will remain. Thank goodness for that.

I think Jesus is trying to appeal to our memory. Remember who you most truly are, a child of God, and move at the world from that truth. Sinners, for Jesus, will always live in a tit-for-tat world. When our coat is taken from us, our knee-jerk reaction is to punish the thief by not only taking our coat back but also taking theirs. Jesus invites us deeper into our identity. Give your shirt as well, not to shame the other person, but do it because that is what God does. And before all else, remember, you are a child of the Divine.

If you only give to those who give to you in return, if you only love those who will love you in return, if you only lend to those whom you hope to receive from, what credit is that to you? For even sinners—even those not connected to God—will do the same. But what about us who are connected to God?

No religious leader in the history of the world dared to speak as radically as Jesus when he said, “love your enemy.” Not only did Jesus speak it—for words are cheap—he also did it. With his dying breath, Jesus said, “Forgive them, Father, for they do not know what they are doing.” What do we not know? That there is a world beyond tit-for-tat.

In his book, Jesus’ Plan For A New World, Fr. Richard Rohr writes: ***“Until there is love for enemies, there is no real transformation, because the enemy always carries the dark side of your own soul. Normally those people who threaten us carry our own faults in a different form. The people who really turn you off are very much like you. Jesus offers not just a suggestion; you’ve got to love your enemy to grow up. Jesus rightly puts it in the imperative form: Do it!”*** Richard

Rohr continues on in that same book, a little further on: ***“If you greet only your brother, what’s so great about that? The ultimate alienating process is that if we stay inside our religious/ethnic group, wars and racism continue. That’s just staying inside a kind of magnified self-love. The key is always to love the stranger at the gate. Love the one outside your comfort zone, the outsider, the other. Until you enter into the outsider and the other, Jesus says, you really have not loved at all”*** (p.57).

~Fr. Phil