

February 19, 2017 Loving One's Enemies Homily: Brothers and sisters, at an official reception during the American Civil War, the then president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, made a brief speech in which he referred to the members of the Confederacy as "erring human beings" rather than as enemies to be destroyed. An elderly woman known for her fierce opposition to the institution of slavery found Lincoln's words to be highly offensive and told him so "Mr. President", she protested, "how can you lower yourself to refer to such slave holding rebels as merely 'erring human beings' who were sworn enemies to the Union and freedom?" "Why madam", replied Lincoln, "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"

In his Sermon on the Mount, Our Lord calls his disciples to some very high standards of behavior. Their righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees and Scribes. Undoubtedly, one of the most severe tests for any disciple of Jesus is to embrace his teaching of loving one's enemies. He may have had the Roman oppressors in mind. Jesus challenges his disciples to love and pray for the very people who occupy their land, tax them heavily, and treat them with violence and gross injustice. It is their radical love for their persecutors that makes them children of their heavenly Father. Indeed, Jesus bases his teaching on the imitation of God, "who makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and unjust". (Mt.5:45) In saying, "Should anyone press you into service for one mile", Jesus is referring to a Roman soldier's right under Roman rule to force someone to carry his equipment for up to one mile. Jesus tells his disciples to go with him an additional mile. For Jesus to ask the Jewish people to show such magnanimity toward their Roman oppressor would have been quite shocking!

In his popular commentary on this gospel reading, the Protestant biblical scholar, William Barclay, cites the words of a great rabbinic teacher, Joshua Ben Nehemiah. Addressing his disciples, the learned rabbi observes, "Have you noticed that the rain fell on the field of 'A', who was righteous and not on the field of 'B' who was wicked?" Or that the sun rose and shone on Israel, who was righteous, and not on the fields of the Gentiles, who were wicked? He concludes, "God causes the sun to shine on Israel and the nations, for the Lord is good to all". Professor Barclay points out that even the learned rabbi was moved and impressed with the sheer benevolence of God to saint and sinner alike.

What possible lessons could we Christians derive from today's gospel? First, keep in mind that Jesus not only taught love of enemies, he lived it in his behavior toward those who in his own time were excluded and socially stigmatized; tax collectors, prostitutes, adulterers and thieves were despised in the name of God. Jesus made them his neighbors. Second, forgiving our enemies requires Divine assistance. Perhaps some of you may recall one of the most extraordinary women of the last century, Corrie Ten Boom. She was one of the relatively few to have survived the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp. After the war, she toured the countries of Europe, urging rival nations to show clemency and understanding to one another. One night, after a talk she delivered in Munich, Germany, a man approached her and extended his hand in a gesture of reconciliation. Corrie froze. For what seemed like an eternity, she was unable to speak, and, at least for the moment, refused to take his hand. The man had been one of the most hated guards of the camp she had been in as a prisoner of war. She offered a prayer in the silence of her heart. "Dear Jesus, help me! I simply cannot forgive him". Then and there, Christ helped her to take his hand in forgiveness. The same Jesus who taught us to love our enemies affords us the grace to do it. All we need do is ask for that powerful gift.

Third, there is one way always to express our love for our enemy: pray for him (or her)! When we begin to pray for those who make our life hellish, things begin to change, sometimes in the others, but always in ourselves. St. Paul exhorted his disciples not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good! He wrote, "Bless your persecutors, bless and do not curse them". (Rom.12:14)

Let us ask ourselves: What is the greatest harm another person has done to me? How have I responded? What are the limits of my love?

Amen!