

Wow! Our scripture readings today present us with a significant challenge that not only calls for a conversion of heart, but also to a new way of thinking and interacting with the world around us:

- To your enemies, show love
- To those who curse you, bless
- To the one who strikes you, do not retaliate
- To those in need, be generous
- To those who offend you, show mercy and forgiveness

Jesus is giving us some basic directives that are meant to help us reshape our world-view and to embrace our call to discipleship.

This challenge is not easy because it runs counter to what society and our culture teach. Jesus was aware of that, but he was also aware that humanity needed to break the cycle of violence and injustice that has established a dynamic that keeps people pitted against one another and which keeps us constantly in competition. Instead of buying into the dynamic where there are clear winners and losers, Jesus is challenging us to embrace the values of love, forgiveness, generosity, and peace.

How do we do this? We begin with a foundation of love. That means that we must learn to not let differences become walls that separate us from one another. To love someone is to see their dignity and value as a human being and to want the best for them. Jesus is not only directing us to love one another, but also to stop judging them. In other words, we cannot let people's appearance, beliefs, interactions or behavior define their worth and dignity. While we may disagree with people, it does not give us license to devalue or degrade them. We can speak the truth, we can struggle for justice, but we must do so with love. When we fail to love, we will inevitably find ourselves trapped in a never-ending cycle of violence which has its roots in gossip, criticism, a need to be right, passive aggressiveness, control, and jealousy.

I recently read an article about forgiveness in the National Catholic Reporter by Patricia Datchuck-Snachez. When Catholic missionaries first arrived in Alaska and started working with the Inuit people, they discovered that their word for forgiveness was a compound word consisting of eight words strung together: Not-being-able-to-think-about-it-anymore. What a beautiful concept – Not-being-able-to-think-about-it-anymore. Once forgiveness is granted, the misdeed is no longer hung over the person's head or used as a weapon to remind the person of their misdeed. Forgiveness involves letting go so that healing can come to both parties. This type of forgiveness is to what Jesus is calling us.

In face of violence Jesus is telling us to turn the other cheek. Turning the other cheek does not mean passively allowing people to walk all over us; quite the contrary. To turn the other cheek is to stand up, to look the offender in the eye, and name the injustice for what it is. In so doing, we claim our own dignity without losing sight of the other person's dignity. It is far from meek submission that simply serves to keep us dependent or victimized. When he was arrested, Jesus asked why they came in the middle of the night, why Judas betrayed him with a kiss, and in the courtyard of the High Priest Jesus called out the violence with the question "why did you strike me?" He confronted his aggressors without stooping to their level of violence.

Look at the civil rights movement in this country. Martin Luther King called for people to stand up without returning violence for violence – that's why we march and peacefully demand change. The young men and women sitting at the lunch counters were taunted and beaten but they did not return the violence. People had dogs turned on them; they were arrested and beaten; yet they responded without further violence. This is how we change the world. A nonviolent response takes courage and resolve, but it changes the dynamic; it shows clearly where the dignity lies, and most importantly, it ends the cycle of vindictiveness and revenge in our hearts.

Jesus also told us to pray for those who hate or wrong us. Why? Because there is danger in hatred – it sucks us in and consumes us. Jesus is offering us a path that leads to freedom of heart. It is not easy to love those who hate us, to forgive those who wrong us, to suspend personal judgment, to not respond to violence with more violence, yet when we do we claim not only our dignity, but we also return the other person's dignity. When we bless those with whom we disagree, those who challenge our values, or those who wrong us, we break their power. It is harder to hate when you recognize the other person's dignity and value. So, Jesus is telling us pray for them; pray so that we can break the connection in our own minds between what they do and who they are.

As Jesus hung on the cross, he prayed for his torturers: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." They killed him physically, but they could not break his spirit. Jesus refused to get sucked into their bitterness and in so doing, he retained his dignity. That my friends is the example Jesus left for us. That is to what we are called. We are called to become instruments of peace and justice. Jesus gave us the keys to salvation, to freedom of heart, and to peace. Change is not easy, but the change to which Jesus is calling us will bring us peace and we will change the world one person, one interaction at a time.

As we go forth today remember the message of Jesus in today's gospel:

- To those who curse you, bless
- To the one who strikes you, do not retaliate
- To those in need, be generous
- To those who offend you, show mercy and forgiveness.

Amen.