

“The Presence” Retreat Closing Mass---7th Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 24, 2019 Sherman Lake YMCA

11:00 a.m.

How many of you have ever played Follow the Leader? The rules are pretty obvious: someone is the leader and the others are supposed to follow what the leader does. The goal is to see who is the best leader. That’s the same for any other childhood game we might play, whether it’s hide and seek, tag, or Red Rover---there are very specific rules, but the goal remains the same---to see who can be the winner; who can claim victory. All games are supposed to be played for fun; but as we know, if someone takes the game too seriously, or gets too competitive, the fun can turn into conflict.

Those kinds of childhood games can actually become the basis for our real-life experiences, even at this time in your lives. You can find yourselves playing a version of Follow the Leader thanks to what we call peer pressure, when you feel pressured by your peers to do what everyone else does, even if it’s something we know not to be right or something virtuous. It’s not a game, but peer pressure has rules, and the goal remains the same as other games: to see who can win, and sometimes, that means to do whatever it takes to be among the winners and not to be left out.

That same thing happens in the adult world, at the national and international arenas as well: business practices, corporate competition, politics, international relationships---all of those arenas have rules that are to be followed, with the goal of seeing who is the best, the winner, the super power. Sadly, we know that the results of breaking those rules results in wars, conflicts, acts of terrorism or violent attacks that we hear about every day on the news.

So, whether we’re children, teenagers (as most of you are), adults, or Bishops, the name of the games change; but the goals (spoken or unspoken) remain the same: win at any cost; be victorious no matter what it takes.

Now, as we heard in today’s Gospel Reading, Jesus came into the world, and wants us to play a new game, one that has radically different rules, and one that has a goal that, we might say, is “out of this world”, i.e. Heaven!

Perhaps you remember last Sunday’s Gospel’ it was about Jesus teaching what we know as the Beatitudes; He gave us four “blessings”; and four “woes”.

Blessed are the poor; the hungry; those who are weeping; and those who are

hated/excluded/insulted/denounced.-----They will enter into the Kingdom of God, and they will (as Jesus says) “rejoice and leap for joy for their reward will be great in Heaven”. **Woe** to those who are rich (here and now), filled up with food and drink, those who laugh and have a great time, and those who receive compliments and the “applause” of others-----They will not enter the Kingdom of God since they don’t see it as important.

The passage we just heard in today’s Gospel is what Jesus says immediately after that. It’s really an elaboration on the Beatitudes----those four “Blesseds”. But before Jesus gives His list of what it means to be “Blessed”, He says something very important: **“To you who hear, I say.....”**. That’s really another way of saying: **“May I have your attention please! Yo---Listen up!----this is really important.”**

And then Jesus says some pretty radically challenging, and very specific, directions: love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you. You can almost feel people’s shock/disbelief, and hear them saying: “Wait---What?!”. But Jesus kept going: if someone hits you on the right cheek, offer the other as well; if someone takes your cloak, give him your tunic as well; give to anyone who asks you for something.

What Jesus is doing is not writing a new rule book; but really a new “Rule for Living” for those who choose to follow Him. It’s a game changer, as we sometimes say.

What Jesus is doing is letting us know that **He**, Who is as human as anyone of us is (except for sin), but also fully Divine, intends to live life completely differently, and He invites those who are strong enough, courageous enough, and wise enough to follow Him and live life as He does! What Jesus is doing is **consciously breaking the pattern** of games such as “Follow the Leader”; He is refusing to play the “game of life” by the old rules. Jesus is making new rules, which is the **only** way to break the cycle of fear, vengeance, and hatred that has been, and continues to, tear our communities and our world apart.

The centerpiece for Jesus’ “Rule for Living” is to take the position of when we choose no longer to win at all costs; instead, we decide that it is far more important to love others, not beat them; it’s more important to show empathy,

compassion, mercy and sacrifice, rather than “take no prisoners” or do whatever it takes to win the game.

Jesus summarizes all of these new rules into one, the one that we have come to know as the Golden Rule: *“Do unto others as you would have them do to you.”* A corollary of the Golden Rule might be: *“Do unto others the way you would hope that God would do to you!”* When we do something wrong, make a mistake, or commit a sin, we all know what we want, in fact, what we need: it is to be able to turn to God and plead for His mercy, forgiveness, understanding; or to use our terms, “to cut us a break!” So, if that’s what we want from God---and in fact, that *is* the way God expresses His unconditional love for us-----why are we so reluctant to cut others in our lives a break?, to forgive them, to offer mercy to those who have harmed us?

That’s exactly what we heard taking place in this morning’s First Reading from first Book of Samuel. David and Saul had a classic “love/hate” relationship. In our Reading today, Saul had come out accompanied with his army to hunt David down and kill him, even though he loved him, because Saul thought David was a threat to his Kingship. As we heard in the Reading, David finds himself in a position of great advantage over Saul, when he could easily kill him before Saul got the chance to kill him. But, out of respect for Saul as “the anointed one” and because of his love for him, David takes the heroic step of showing mercy to Saul, thereby trying to bring this ugly conflict to an end by refusing to keep playing the game of “gotcha”.

As we celebrate this Closing Mass concluding this very special time of prayer and reflection known as “The Presence”, I hope that you’re ready to go back home as a changed person--- perhaps greatly changed; I hope that you’re ready to go back home with a new, and deeper, understanding of Who Jesus is, and therefore, who **YOU** are!

I’m sure you’ve been enriched and challenged by the several talks that Sr. Helena Burns gave you about the importance of the Holy Spirit as our inspiration and strength, and how we are “charged” and driven to be joyful witnesses for Jesus and the Gospel in our lives.

And I hope that the talk Fr. Derda gave you encouraged you to be courageous and faithful disciples of Jesus in everything you do.

For those many of you who took advantage of the opportunity to encounter Jesus' love and mercy in the Sacrament of Penance/Reconciliation, you know firsthand what our Psalm Response that we sang together just a few minutes ago means: *"The Lord is kind and merciful....He pardons all your iniquities, heals all your ills....and as far as the East is from the West, that's how far God puts your sins/transgressions away"---they are forgiven and forgotten!*

Last night, you all experienced Jesus' Real Presence throughout the Eucharistic Procession and the time you were able to spend in Adoration and Prayer with Jesus directly in the Blessed Sacrament.

All that you that you have learned, and experienced here in these days of "The Presence" Retreat, are geared toward reminding you of Jesus' total and unconditional love for each of you. And that is how you find out **who you are** by personally coming to know **Who Jesus is**; that is why you **must** pass Jesus' Love on to others, the way we heard Him tell us in today's Gospel.

All of you have either recently been confirmed, or sometime soon will be confirmed. We all know that we cannot be Jesus' disciples without a deep and personal relationship with Jesus, **and** unless we open ourselves to the power and Gifts of the Holy Spirit. To be a disciple of Jesus means having the courage and generosity of heart to live our lives the way Jesus lived His, and to be willing to break that destructive pattern of hatred, revenge, violence, racism, by being willing to take the initiative to live according to Jesus' Beatitudes, and to follow His directions for His Rule of Living.

As Pope Francis said at the recent World Youth Day in Panama: *"Jesus invites you into His 'Love story' wherever you are and with everyone around you."* It's a love story with radically different rules.

May each of you enter into that love story and make it your own, living your lives according to Jesus' "Rules for Living", because----spoiler alert---- you know how that story ends: Jesus has won the Victory, and we has shared His Victory with all of us. We're already the winners, and when we live with Him, we will win the game of life, and we will live **happily ever after** with Jesus in Heaven. Amen!