

Homily February 19, 2017

When people speak to me about difficulty in getting over anger at someone who has hurt them I take a somewhat pragmatic approach. First I give them a motive that has some self-interest. I remind them that every time they recall a past hurt, and then go on to become angry and refuel the hurt, they are giving the perpetrator too much power. Through no additional effort that person is able to cause more hurt to them. Then I suggest responding at the first moment the memory returns with a previously prepared one line prayer simply turning the matter over to the Lord, since there is little else the injured party can do. Perhaps that prayer might express their challenged desire to forgive. Finally, I always remind people seeking to forgive for a past hurt does not mean denying the reality of a wrong action and authentic hurt. Forgiveness does not re-write the past but it seeks to write a better future.

I thought of these practical reminders as once again I read Jesus' challenging words against revenge, and for generosity, love of neighbors and prayer for enemies. These are words from the Sermon on the Mount, a collection of teachings that call Jesus' followers to move beyond any minimalist approach to following the commandments. While we are called to pursue justice, sometimes we might not demand what is just for ourselves. Jesus' words don't prevent us from protecting ourselves and others. However, they do clearly reject revenge and suggest that sometimes we have to just "let it go."

Our first reading from the book of Leviticus reminds us that love of neighbor was commanded in the old testament. While the passage conceded that one may have to reprove a fellow citizen, it went on to caution: "do not incur sin because of him." I see that pointing in the direction of Jesus' words. The necessary reproof of a fellow citizen (a concept that is repeated in the new testament as fraternal correction) must be guided by charity and prudence and exclude anger. The most significant step forward in Jesus' words is the call to extend such leniency even to enemies. And I would broaden the concept of enemy to all those whom we regard negatively because of their words and actions, whether directed to us and hurtful to us or not.

The real question is: "How can we really do that? Aren't we human? Isn't it natural to get a little angry now and then when people act against us? Shouldn't we prevent people from taking advantage of us?" Jesus really is asking us to be a different kind of people. It is a difference that comes from how we relate to other people. It is a difference between how we have or have not given sufficient attention to Jesus. The

Gospel passage concluded with Jesus' call that His followers: "be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect."

In our second reading St. Paul gives us some idea of how such movement toward perfection might be possible for the believer. He spoke to all of us when he said: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you." This is the basis of our traditional language which refers to the person, reborn in Jesus Christ, as a temple of the Holy Spirit. It is the whole person, body, mind, heart, soul. It is part of the foundation of our respect for the integrity of the body and the call to exercise a proper stewardship of the body in terms of health and wellness. It also spills over to our respectful treatment for the body, one's human remains after death. The body, the remains are a relic, as it were, of the divine work of the Holy Spirit through the words and actions of the deceased in their life time.

For our purposes today we are more directed to that aspect of the temple which is our mind, heart and soul. It is allowing the Holy Spirit to dwell, thrive, transform and act and through mind, heart and soul in a way that makes us more able to engage in the perfection of sometimes letting things go and even praying for our enemies.

Like all buildings, especially temples, our temple of the Holy Spirit needs constant attention. We continually renew it and cleanse with prayer, worship, sacramental participation, learning, fellowship and apostolic works. This is how the Holy Spirit thrives within us so that increasingly our thoughts, words and actions are more reflective of the perfection of God than the imperfection of the human person.

I was given an interesting reminder the other day of just how this concept of prayer for one's enemies has not been fully embraced. It was in the context of my monthly gathering with a small priest support group to which I belong. One of the priests described how after the inauguration he included a prayer for the president in the general intercessions of the Mass. A parishioner whom he generally regarded as appreciative of his ministry became quite upset. He apparently read into the prayer for the president as some sort of personal endorsement of everything the president might say or do. As I was listening to this, I thought, "Now if one had serious issues with the president or other public official, and special concerns about what he (or she) might say or do, shouldn't that be all the more a motive to pray for that person? Unless, of course, one doesn't really believe in the mysterious power of prayer or one wishes to pick and choose which of Jesus' words in the Gospel they will take seriously.