

**7<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (Cycle A)**  
**February 20, 2011 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.**

INTRODUCTION

In Babylon, in about the 18<sup>th</sup> century BC, a king named Hammurabi promulgated what may have been the first written code of law in the world. It was probably even earlier than the Mosaic law. The idea of codified law is that everyone knows what the law is, what the abstract standards of behavior are, and what is expected of them, and what the penalty for transgression is.

Hammurabi's code was noted for being founded on *Lex Talionis* – the Law of Retaliation. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life. There are still societies in today's world that follow this principle – repaying evil with corresponding evil. I've read of a couple of such cases just recently. One was a man who was to undergo surgery that would deliberately paralyze him, in retaliation for wounding someone else and causing paralysis. Another was a man who was to be deliberately blinded in retaliation for blinding someone else. That sort of thing is going on right now, today, in some parts of the world.

That's not how we do things here. Most of us at least try to rise above such things. But still, I hear a lot of people advocating that really merciless punishments be imposed on people who transgress the law, and sometimes even to people with whom they disagree.

For those of us who attempt to follow the teachings of Jesus, it can be very difficult to live in today's world. I don't think I can remember a time – at least not in recent history – when there has been so much hostility, hatred and violence in the world.

Even in our own country, so many people seem to be willing to express the most cruel and brutal sentiments about each other, to each other, even to the point of threatening violence against each other. Even to the point of initiating violence against each other. That's not to say that people who transgress the law shouldn't be punished, but the punishment should have some element of penitence, some possibility for repentance and redemption. That's why they call them "penitentiaries."

But what discourages me is the desire to punish people who have not transgressed any laws, out of hatred. What is particularly discouraging to me is that so much of the hatred seems to be directed at people of faith, especially Christians, and particularly Catholics. I've often said that anti-Christianity, and particularly anti-Catholicism, is the last remaining socially acceptable bigotry.

It especially puzzles me how people who present themselves as paragons of virtue, responsibility, social justice, concern and caring and compassion for others have no hesitation about ridiculing and vilifying Catholicism and Catholics in the most outrageous language possible.

Movies and TV shows and art exhibits, books and speeches, editorials and commentaries, websites and blogs, all express things about Catholics and Catholicism that they would not dream of applying to other religions.

In a way, maybe it gives us a little insight into what Jesus and his disciples must have encountered in the First Century. They constantly encountered people who did not understand, did not want to understand, and were willing to distort the Christian message to suit their own prejudices. Just as the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus in some kind of blasphemy or violation of the law, so the enemies of Christianity focus only on the negative . . . murderers of abortion doctors, Jim Jones, Westboro Baptist Church . . . and try to tar all Christians with the same brush.

Unfortunately, there are too many who call themselves Christians who just might deserve to be tarred. And yet the Church endures and flourishes.

We live in a world, in a country, that is largely hostile to the teachings of Christ. And yet the Church endures and flourishes.

How do we respond to that in the spirit of love and forgiveness? How do we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us?

It's not easy. And yet it's what we are called upon to do.

And even if we're somehow able to do it in the abstract . . . forgive and love and pray for people we don't even know, people we've never met . . . how about the people we do know, the people we can call by name, who have hurt us or disappointed us or offended us? Sometimes I think that's even more difficult.

It reminds me of an ailment I talked about once before . . . an ailment many of us suffer from . . . an ailment that has many names . . . I call it "Irish Alzheimer's."

That's when you forget everything except the grudges.

I guess it could be called "Italian Alzheimer's," or any of a number of other names.

Granting forgiveness is a difficult thing for many of us. Especially when it involves someone we know personally, who has offended us in some way, real or imagined.

But that's what we're expected to do. We had an Adult Faith Formation program last Sunday on the Our Father – the Lord's Prayer. We talked about the seven petitions in the prayer. The last four petitions are things we ask God to do for us.

The fifth petition is ". . . and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

You know, if we really thought about that one, we might be afraid to ask it. How do we ask God to forgive us? ". . . as we forgive those who trespass against us," that's how. Do we really want Him to do that? Isn't there something we need to do first?

This Sunday's readings are a call to holiness. "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." "So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Holiness and perfection are not traits that belong to human beings by nature. Holiness does not come from within us. Holiness is not a "reward" for our behavior or our moral effort. Holiness comes from

above, from the Father, not from nature, not from within us. Holiness comes from allowing God's holiness to enter into us, which requires us to be open to receiving it.

We heard it in last Sunday's Gospel:

Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar,  
and there recall that your brother  
has anything against you,  
leave your gift there at the altar,  
go first and be reconciled with your brother,  
and then come and offer your gift.

The way to holiness is love. Not just the negative side we hear this morning – “do not hate,” “do not bear grudges” – but the positive side as well “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

The Church teaches us that we can be holy many ways. In the ordinary day-to-day affairs of life, of being a family, in our work, in our leisure, in our human relationships. We seek holiness by doing whatever we do in the spirit of justice and love. Even to those who hate us.

I didn't say it was easy. It's not easy. And yet it's what we are called upon to do.

We have some special guests with us today. Today the “Special Needs” ministry met at Holy Spirit for their annual retreat, and they have joined us at this Mass. I think these folks are some of the most forgiving people I know. I don't think there's a hateful bone in any of their bodies. I don't know that any of them have “enemies” or bear any grudges. This is an especially good weekend for them to be with us, I think.

## Readings

### Reading 1

**Lv 19:1-2, 17-18**

The LORD said to Moses,  
“Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them:  
Be holy, for I, the LORD, your God, am holy.  
“You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart.  
Though you may have to reprove your fellow citizen,  
do not incur sin because of him.  
Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against any of your people.  
You shall love your neighbor as yourself.  
I am the LORD.”

### Responsorial Psalm

**Ps 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13**

R. (8a) The Lord is kind and merciful.  
Bless the LORD, O my soul;  
and all my being, bless his holy name.  
Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits.  
R. The Lord is kind and merciful.  
He pardons all your iniquities,  
heals all your ills.  
He redeems your life from destruction,  
crowns you with kindness and compassion.  
R. The Lord is kind and merciful.  
Merciful and gracious is the LORD,  
slow to anger and abounding in kindness.  
Not according to our sins does he deal with us,  
nor does he requite us according to our crimes.  
R. The Lord is kind and merciful.  
As far as the east is from the west,  
so far has he put our transgressions from us.  
As a father has compassion on his children,  
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.  
R. The Lord is kind and merciful.

### Reading 2

**1 Cor 3:16-23**

Brothers and sisters:  
Do you not know that you are the temple of God,  
and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?  
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person;  
for the temple of God, which you are, is holy.  
Let no one deceive himself.  
If any one among you considers himself wise in this age,  
let him become a fool, so as to become wise.  
For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God,  
for it is written:  
*God catches the wise in their own ruses,*  
and again:  
*The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise,*  
*that they are vain.*  
So let no one boast about human beings, for everything belongs to you,  
Paul or Apollos or Cephas,  
or the world or life or death,  
or the present or the future:  
all belong to you, and you to Christ, and Christ to God.

### Gospel

**Mt 5:38-48**

Jesus said to his disciples:  
“You have heard that it was said,

*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*

But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil.  
When someone strikes you on your right cheek,  
turn the other one as well.

If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic,  
hand over your cloak as well.

Should anyone press you into service for one mile,  
go for two miles.

Give to the one who asks of you,  
and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.

“You have heard that it was said,

*You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.*

But I say to you, love your enemies

and pray for those who persecute you,

that you may be children of your heavenly Father,  
for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good,  
and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust.

For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have?

Do not the tax collectors do the same?

And if you greet your brothers only,

what is unusual about that?

Do not the pagans do the same?

So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.”