

## *The Power of Love: No Laughing Matter*

Some years ago, I was attempting to teach Jesus' message of love to a group of fourth graders. I asked them, "What would Jesus want you to do if someone hit you?" Though the class comedian offered, "Hit him back," at which everyone laughed, most of the children agreed that Jesus would tell us not to hit back. Then I read words of Jesus from today's Gospel:

*When someone strikes you on your right cheek,  
turn the other one as well.*

They all laughed again, and I lost them!

Notwithstanding the obvious specter of physical and psychological abuse in our day, this is an extremely difficult moral principle for all of us. In an atmosphere of terrorism and bullying, turning the other cheek does, on the surface, seem laughable. Though Jesus would never sanction victimization, what is clear from his life-long message and mission is that we consistently recognize the power of love, and to us who profess our faith in him, that is most definitely no laughing matter!

Jesus' counsel to pray for those who persecute us may not be any more palatable. But the guiding principle remains: love your enemies. When I was in seventh grade, Sister Matthew Marie told us, "If God did not love Adolph Hitler, God would cease to be God." I can't think of any other event from my childhood that caused me as many sleepless nights. At the time, I found it incomprehensible that God would love a person so evil. Even though Sister pointed out that Hitler could refuse God's love, I still found the concept of such love baffling. And let's face it, for us to be challenged to love in that same way is just as baffling.

If nothing else, today's Gospel makes us more aware than ever of our frail human nature. The struggle of good versus evil is not out there somewhere. The cartoon character Pogo had it right: "We have met the enemy; and he is us!" The art of world cultures has depicted the struggle between good and evil as "titanic," and it is. This is more evident than ever when these Sacred Scriptures are placed in the context of our world today. All of this intensifies struggle to accept what Jesus asks of us.

As recent Sunday Scriptures have taken us deeper and deeper into the meaning of discipleship, the stakes seem to be getting higher and higher. Yet, today, St. Paul's encouragement disarms our apprehension in this struggle as he challenges us to become fools, so as to become wise. Further, what Jesus is asking us is that we be holy as God is holy, and because God is love, we, individually and as a community, can through our discipleship be the presence of that love in the world.

So Jesus' challenge to turn the other cheek is a call to begin eliminating in our lives those issues that militate against the fulfillment of that Gospel mandate of love. Seeking reconciliation in our personal relationships would be a prudent way to begin, because as Jesus points out, "Do not the pagans do the same?" Is there someone we have hurt, or someone who may have hurt us? Are we willing to be reconciled to someone near and dear to us? Becoming holy, being God-like, takes time – we're human after all! – and reconciling personal relationships offers a constant and significant means to that end.

Further, the current rabid polarization in our church and our country also demands our attention. Would it be so personally humiliating to invite a polar opposite to a meal simply to be in the presence of the other? The point initially would NOT be the discussion of an issue that divides, but rather a dialog on those topics outside the area of dispute, topics that would be easily embraced as common ground. As people of faith, as people who profess the power of God's love working in and through us, are we willing to at least try? Are we willing to hold in prayer the very people who threaten us today?

Believe me, I know the challenge we're offered by these Scriptures is not easy. I guess we might laugh like those fourth graders at the thought of turning the other cheek, or, like that seventh grader, lose sleep over the thought of God loving Osama bin Laden. But as daunting as this challenge surely is, we're here gather around the altar yet again, seeking the nourishment that can empower us to really become what we receive in this Eucharist, and to more fully grasp the power of God's love working in and through us – and that, my friends is no laughing matter!

## *Sabbath Reflections through the week...*

*Where is your story in the Sacred Story today?*

*Which of the modest proposals offered in this week's homily would you consider the most feasible? Why?*

*Which of the suggestions offered in this homily would be, for you, the most challenging? Why? Would you still be willing to give it a try? If not, why not?*

*Compose a prayer for someone you perceive as an "enemy," or at least a person with whom you strongly disagree.*