

7th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME; Cycle – A; Feb. 19th 2023
Leviticus 19: 1-2, 17-18; 1Cor. 3: 16-23; Mt. 5: 38-48

Dear Sisters & Brothers,

This is the third week in a row we listen to the Sermon on the Mount of Jesus in Matthew's gospel, which is the summarized form of the entire teachings of Jesus.

It seems that *Tit for Tat* was the policy of Moses against the criminal offenses committed by people. But he just adopted many laws of the ancient *Babylonian king Hammurabi* who introduced the law of *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth* in his kingdom. So retaliation with equal degree was an accepted rule among the Jews too. The punishment, an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth seems to be very cruel. In fact it was introduced by Moses, to avoid unlimited atrocities or retaliation one might inflict against the enemies. In other words, if you take an eye of his neighbor your one eye will be taken, not more than that. But Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount rejects any sort of retaliation at all. **For Jesus, retaliation, or even limited vengeance, has no place in the Christian life.** At the same time, graceful acceptance of an offense requires great strength and discipline of character as well as strengthening by God's grace. *Jesus wants his disciples to repay evil with kindness.* Instead of retaliation, **Jesus gives us his new law of love, grace, forgiveness and reconciliation.** He explains the Christian approach by giving a few illustrations in today's gospel. As we are limited in time let us reflect only on the teaching of Jesus, **"love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."**

When we speak about enemies, we need not think about Al-Qaida and ISIS. G.K. Chesterton, the English writer says, **"We are commanded to love our neighbors and enemies; they are generally the same people."** *In our context an enemy can be anyone who hurts our feelings or opposes our views and intends to do harm to us.* But in the Jewish context the enemy has wider meaning. First of all, the Jews considered any non-Jews or gentiles as enemies. Even when the gentiles didn't do any sort of harm to the Jews, they were the enemies and to be hated. Besides them, they had the fellow Jews as enemies who did something hurtful. When we hear the saying of Jesus about the love of enemies we too get a little confused as what Jesus meant by that. **Can we love the child abusers, serial killers, rapists and terrorists as we love our family members or our friends and pray for them?** So we need a little explanation of the love of enemies meant by Jesus.

In English language there is only one word for love, whether it is love between parents and children, love between man and woman, love between friends and love for

enemies, everything is described in the same word love. But in Greek there are four different words used for love which express four different types of love. The first word is **storge** which stands for the love existing among the family members, between parents and children and among the siblings; the second type of love is **eros** which describes the passionate love between man and woman or husband and wife; the third word for love is **philia** which is the love visible among close friends. The fourth word is **agape** which indicates unconquerable benevolence and goodwill towards somebody, no matter who he/she is, a stranger or enemy. When Jesus said love your enemies, he had in mind this type of love, the agape. *If we treat people with agape, it means that no matter who they are, what they do to us, no matter how they treat us, no matter if they insult us or injure us or grieve us, we will never allow any bitterness against them to invade our hearts rather we seek their highest good.* In other words we don't wish any injury to happen to them.

As we know, during his public life Jesus was accused of many things which he never did and insulted by the scribes and Pharisees. He was crucified without adequate reasons and any proper trial. But he could pray hanging on the cross, **“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”** Many great men and women could practice the same love. Mahatma Gandhi, the national leader of India could win the independence for India with strict non-violence; he got this idea from Jesus. The following year of independence when he was shot at by a Hindu fanatic, before he died, Gandhi asked the Prime Minister of India to set free his assassin without any trail or punishment. Gandhi was a follower of Jesus though he was not a baptized Christian. Pope St. John Paul II went to the prison to meet the criminal who tried to assassinate him and forgave his crime. Love your enemy; forgive the enemy and pray for the enemy- they all sound morally good. But it is hard to put them in practice. Only with the grace of Jesus who practiced the same in his life, we will get the strength to practice it. A Chinese proverb says, **“Whoever pursues revenge should dig two graves; one for the avenged and one for himself.”** Some people may think that forgiveness is the option of the weak, for they are unable to retaliate. Mahatma Gandhi says, **“The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.”** *Jesus' principle of non- resistance is not an advice for passive suffering; but an active way of conquering evil with good.* In Bill Adler's popular book of *‘Letters from kids,’* an 8 year-old boy from Nashville, Tennessee wrote this note: *“Dear Pastor, I know God wants us to love everybody, but he surely never met my sister.” Yours Sincerely, Arnold.* Yes, we too may make the excuse that surely God has never met my enemy.