

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Mark Twain once famously said, “I have no problem with those parts of the Bible I don’t understand. It’s those parts of the Bible I do understand that gives me fits.” Our Gospel text this morning certainly fits into that category.

It gives us fits because Jesus’ teaching is so contrary to our human experience. Take for example this business of turning the other cheek when someone strikes you on the right so he can strike you on the left. Com’n! That’s un-natural.

Recently I had occasion to be in a Chester County courtroom, when a very slight 19 year old was brought in cuffed and chained. He had been imprisoned for two weeks for a relatively minor offense. But, while in jail he had gotten into a fight. He explained what had happened, which was basically corroborated by the video camera. It seems a larger inmate had been using the phone. When he finished his call, he told everyone standing there they were not to use it because he was expecting a call back. The little guy had been waiting for some time, so he stepped up to the phone intending to use it. The big guy comes over and punches the little guy in the face. Now, being a little guy in prison, if he didn’t fight back, he would have wound up with even more serious repercussions.

The guards came and broke up the fight, but since the little guy had been fighting, the prison rule was that 10 more days had to be added to his sentence. Having served his original sentence, the little guy sought redress from the court that he should have to remain in jail for an additional seven days.

As I listened to this I was sure the judge would allow the young man to walk. He didn’t start the fight. He was just defending himself. However the judge said she wasn’t going to micro-manage the good order of the prison and told the young man he would have to serve the additional seven days. In light of Jesus’ teaching, the question before us in this example would the young man have been better off if he had simply turned so the big guy could punch him again? I DON’T THINK SO?

So how are we to understand what Jesus is telling us? It occurred to me that we might start from the end of this teaching and then work forward. In the very last verse Jesus tells us, “So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect”.

What, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, is the perfection of God? Think for a moment, if you will, of all the attributes of God. God is all-knowing. God is all-seeing. God is all-powerful. God is sovereign. While all of those are great attributes of God, the one that speaks of his perfection is that God is all loving. God offers Himself to us as a role model to show us how to love. That is why God created us in his own image and likeness; that we may come to love like God loves. God created us to fulfill God’s own need to love

and to be loved. If, as St. John tells us, that God is love. what is love without a subject to receive that love and how empty is love that is never loved in return?

Isn't it surprising how easy it is for us to miss this basic truth? It is the deepest desire of God's heart that we are to learn to love as God loves. That is the goal that God hopes to achieve in all of the saving work that God does.

So, it is that throughout what we call salvation history, we see God reaching out in loving interactions with humanity. In fact the Bible is a grand saga of God reaching out to His people and calling the people back to Him. In covenant after covenant God promises to love and care for the people whom He loves and asks them to show their love for Him in return. Love then is total commitment of self to and for the other that we learn in one of our most favorite passages of Scripture: "for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him, may not perish, but have eternal life." That is God's ultimate goal that all of humanity live in loving relationship with him and with each other for all of eternity.

Now let's get back to some of Jesus' earlier sayings in this passage: "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 as well." It's important to understand that a slap on the cheek was offered as an insult. Today we say, "That was a backhanded compliment if I've ever heard one." So Jesus was basically saying don't waste your time seeking retaliation, revenge, or retribution. In other words you're never going to get even by trying to get even.

But the Lord is certainly not saying that anyone should be another person's doormat. It's like the story of a man who walked into a restaurant, sat down to eat, and a big bully came over, chopped him across the neck, knocking him flat on the floor. The bully said, "That's karate from Japan."

The man got up, rubbed his neck, sat down, and tried to eat his meal. A few minutes later the bully returns, picks the man off the chair, throws him over his shoulder, and he collapses to the floor. The bully said, "That's Judo from Japan."

The man on the floor gets up, walks out of the restaurant, with the bully laughing at him. Shortly, the smaller man returns, walks up behind the bully, and cracks him over the head, saying, "That's a crowbar from Sears."

Sometimes, self-love, that has to precede loving another, requires self-defense—but not revenge.

Jesus goes on to say, “If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand over your cloak as well.” This really goes contrary to everything we seem to believe in. What the Lord is saying is in your giving, give not only what is required of you, but give more than is required. That’s love.

Parents, you do this all the time. At least, I hope you do. You know that you are required to house, nurture, nourish, and educate your children. But when you make time for them; listen to them; enjoy being in their company; encourage them; and comfort them, that’s loving like God loves. You give far more than only what is required, and in doing so you teach your children to love as God loves.

Further, Jesus teaches, “Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go for two.” This means stepping out of your comfort zone for the sake of another. Last night I heard on the news the story of a man whose car had crashed and was burning on the side of a highway. His foot and ankle were trapped beneath the pedals of the car and he couldn’t get free. He screamed and screamed for help, but the cars just kept whizzing by him.

Finally, a car screeched to a halt behind him and a young man came running to him as the flames came closer and closer. With no thought of his own safety, the young man reached into the car, pulled the man’s leg free and dragged him from the burning car to safety just as it exploded. The man in the car was Black and the rescuer was White. Both were expectant fathers. When asked what motivated him to go to such lengths to save the man, the rescuer said, “I was just glad to be able to do for someone what I hope someone would do for me.” That’s how God loves. He doesn’t count the cost. He doesn’t hold back. He comes to save us, and wants us to work at saving each other too.

Finally, Jesus says, “Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.” Here, you will have to forgive me, but I have to revert to my old story of “Me and Mr. Charlie”.

Charlie was a raggedy old street person who visited our Rectory regularly when I was at Most Precious Blood in North Philadelphia. We had turned the kitchen of the Rectory into a kind of soup kitchen and offered lunch there every day to homeless people. Invariably, Mr. Charley would show up and everyone would holler because he smelled so bad.

Though my office was on the second floor, I knew Charley had come in because I could smell him. I would quickly gather some second-hand clothes we kept in the house, a wash cloth, towels, soap, and Clorox and go down and say, “Come on, Charley, you know the drill.” I would take him in the back where we had a bathroom with an old claw-foot tub, have Charley undress and throw his dirty clothes in a plastic bag, while I got his bath water ready, with a healthy dose of Clorox in it. I would help Charley bathe and get dressed. Then, he was ready to eat his lunch.

One Good Friday he came banging on the door and ringing the bell. The soup kitchen was closed and I was getting things ready for the celebration of the Good Friday service. Charley kept banging on the door. Finally, I answered, and said, “Charlie, we’re closed today. It’s Good Friday. He answered, in all his odiferousness, “But I’m hungry.” I said, “Charley, there’s no one here to help you. I’m sorry but you’ll have to come back on Monday.” Again he said, “But I’m hungry.” Realizing that he wasn’t going away, I said, “OK, Charley, come in, but I don’t know what’s left in the kitchen.” There really wasn’t much. But I found some bread and peanut butter and jelly and some milk. As I was getting Charley’s sandwich ready, I realized I was hungry too. So, I slapped together a sandwich for myself and poured us both some milk and we sat down and ate together. I tried to stay down-wind of him because he was really, really ripe. We chatted for a while and finally I said that I had a lot to do. With that, Mr. Charley came over to me, pulled my face down to his—he was just a short, little guy—and he kissed me right on the lips and said, “Thank you! Thank you for loving me! I always find love when I come here.”

I knew then and there, and believe it today, as surely as I did 30 some years ago, it was Jesus Himself who kissed me. I never saw Mr. Charley after that. But that kiss! That kiss! I will always remember that kiss. That’s how God loves when you “give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.

As to loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you, it’s obvious that God has no enemies among us because we are all his children. This is so important for us to remember as we seek to live in peace in these contentious times. Our mission is the one that God established for us all. We are to learn to love God and love one another as God loves. “So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.”