

Homily
7th Sunday after Epiphany
February 19, 2017

In the Name of the Father, Son & Holy Spirit, Amen

The words we heard Jesus speak in today's Gospel are really very astonishing things that he is suggesting. I can only imagine that those people who were listening to Jesus, particularly his disciples, it would have been a difficult and confusing thing to hear.

Their expectations of the long-expected Messiah, were one who would be a great military leader who would not only liberate and deliver them, but also punish the enemies who oppressed them and hold them captive.

To the people around Jesus who expected this, his teachings of non-retaliation and non-violence would have sounded all wrong. This is not the type of Messiah that they were expecting. However, it may have been that their expectations were built on a fundamental misunderstanding of who God is.

And no doubt, there are times that we make the mistake of thinking that God relates to the world the most people relate to it. It is a very

easy mistake to make because we live in a world culture dominated by the exercise of power. Strength is often shown through the exercise of force. This was true in the days of Jesus as well.

The words Jesus spoke are very familiar to us. Perhaps we have heard them so much that we don't give them too much thought or take time to examine them more closely, and take them more seriously.

For in these few words, Jesus lays before everyone his plans for the kingdom he proclaims.

Jesus isn't trying to modify the rules of the world. He's not, contrary to prosperity preachers, inviting us to figure out how to make the most of this world or have our best life now.

And he's not inviting us to find a safe port amid the storms of this world. Rather, he's starting a revolution by calling the rules of this world into question and, at the very same time, redeeming this world that he loves.

In these words there is an invitation to us to be the people God has created us to be so that we might not just persevere through this challenging life but to flourish, able to make a difference in our world.

Jesus tells us that when it comes to loving our neighbor, it applies to everyone, everywhere. He says to "love our enemies". And when we do that, we come to see the person we've considered an "enemy" as a "neighbor." And the whole structure of friend and enemy is dismantled.

Instead of allies and foes, we're simply left with human beings who are all children of God. And because they are all children of God, they all benefit from God's love equally. As Jesus put it, God gives the life-sustaining gifts of sun and rain to all equally.

When Jesus told his disciples to "Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect" it doesn't mean that we have to be as morally and ethically flawless as God is. That's impossible.

But what it does mean is that we are to strive to give the same generosity to others that we've received from God. I think that's what it means to "love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus tells us listeners to give even more than asked from those in need. For the poor, the loss of one's "cloak" would have meant a cold night of sleep since the cloak was normally the evening blanket as well.

Just as God provides good things, like rain, for the just and the unjust, so should we, as God's followers, treat others (whether "good" or "evil") with consistent love.

Jesus calls the powers of the day into question by describing an entirely different way to relate to each other, inviting us into relationships governed not by power but by vulnerability grounded in love.

"'An eye for an eye' makes all people blind," Gandhi would say almost two thousand years later. Jesus invites us to overcome the urge to retribution with loving compliance and patience.

Martin Luther King, Jr., a student of both Jesus and Gandhi, once said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."

The last line of this gospel passage -- "*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*" - does not mean moral perfect so much as

it means something that has grown up, matured, and strives towards its perfect end.

It's good to keep in mind that we were created not merely for justice but also for love and life. Strength eventually fails. Power corrupts. And survival of the fittest leaves many bodies on the ground. Love alone transforms, redeems, and creates new life.

Jesus says that we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth. And he means it. He enables; he empowers his disciples to live lives of love. Jesus means what he says and he has the means to back up what he says.

Thanks be to God for his immeasurable love, Amen.