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HOMILY by Fr. John Moloney

**Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time February 19th
2017.**

TITLE: Our Enemies.

Introduction

The part of today's Gospel that is perhaps the most difficult for us to follow is the Lord's teaching, to love our enemies. We can love our neighbor. We can love the disadvantaged. We can love those we perceive to be inferior to us. But to love the enemy, the one who intentionally harmed me, is very difficult to do.

The Lord addresses something we have all felt at one time or another,--the desire for revenge.

This is the point of today's Gospel.-The Lord is teaching us that the only way to end the cycle of revenge and retaliation is for me to pull the plug on it .This is called forgiveness.

FORGIVENESS

The word "forgiveness" sounds weak and anemic at first. But is it? - Which requires more courage, inner strength maturity, and spiritual muscle to

strike back or to end the conflict? Striking back is easy. It happens in every schoolyard in the world. It takes nerve and spiritual virility to forgive. Any child can strike back. It takes an adult to forgive. Consider what the world and our personal world would be like if we never forgave, if we remembered every hurt and every slight. We would end up in a spiritual and emotional gridlock of resentment, spending precious hours of our day to get even.

Conclusion

If we refuse to forgive others, we do not really harm them but do hurt ourselves. AMEN.

(The above is the text of the preached homily at mass this Sunday. What follows is an unabridged version)

THE HUMAN HEART

The human heart has its own commandments

In the First Reading, " you shall love your neighbor as yourself "and " Be holy , for I the Lord , your God , am holy ."

Agreed, but what does God's holiness look like?

The Responsorial Psalm puts it this way:

The Lord is kind and merciful. He pardons all my life from destruction, crowns me with kindness and compassion.

A most comfortable portrayal of God .We too can love this way, if we work hard enough.

Can't we?

In the Gospel, Jesus gives us his own guidelines. He quotes the old laws, as he did last week, and then opens them up giving us a view of their insides.

Old rule: "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." New rule :offer no resistance to one who is evil ...If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic hand over your cloak as well...Do not turn your back on one who wants to borrows ."

Old Rule: "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy" New Rule: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" The heavenly Father loves and rewards both the bad and the good, the just and the unjust."Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Really, isn't that really absurd? We are tiny ants compared to God, crawlers and boulders that flew loose in the big bang. How are we to be as perfect as God? Jesus had better give us some very deep,

compensating insights about the human heart and the laws that govern it!

And so he does .In the Second Reading he says "You are the temple of God, and the Spirit of God dwells in you. "

My interpretation: God builds the human heart with a hole in it, an openness that can let others in if we don't block them out with selfishness. Especially when we let ourselves get used to it. We can even let God's own self in. He will stretch our arms out to others so that we will truly give to them out of love.

LOVING OUR ENEMIES

It is the ultimate challenge not to hate those who oppose us, not to hate our enemies, to continue to have gracious and forgiving hearts in the face of misunderstanding, bitter opposition, jealousy, anger, hatred, positive mistreatment and even the threat of death. And to be a disciple of Jesus means that, at some point, we will be hated. We will make enemies. It happened to Jesus and he assured us that it will happen to us.

Of how we need to respond to our enemies. When scripture tells us that Jesus saved the people from their sins, it doesn't mean that in offering his death to his father as a sacrifice in one eternal act

he took away our sins. It also points to his way of living and how, as he demonstrated, forgiving and loving our enemies to take away sin, by absorbing it. Jesus' great act of love, as Kierkegaard said is meant to be imitated not just admired.

WE AREN'T VERY LOVING AND FORGIVING IN THE FACE OF OPPOSITION!

But how do we do this? It seems that we don't know how to love our enemies that we don't have the strength to forgive. We preach it as an ideal and naively believe that we are doing it. But, for the most part we aren't .We really don't love and forgive those who oppose us. Too often we are distrustful, disrespectful, bitter, demonizing and (metaphorically speaking) murderous towards each other. If there is much love and forgiveness of enemies in our lives, it's far from evident both in our world and in our churches. As Ronald Knox once said, as Christians we have really taken seriously Jesus' challenge to love our enemies and to turn the other cheek.

I say this sympathetically. We all need help .The old saying is true: to err is human, to forgive is divine. So how do we start? And forgiving in face of opposition

We might start by both acknowledging our failure and admitting our helplessness individually and as churches. We aren't very loving and forgiving in the face of opposition! Next we need to highlight this inadequacy and the importance of this failure in our preaching and teaching. Loving our enemies is the real moral and religious litmus test! We don't have the right to call anyone a "cafeteria Christian" or a compromised follower of Christ unless first of all, we ourselves, are persons who are gracious, respectful, loving and forgiving in the face of anyone who opposes us. Let's start, all of us from this humble place of admittance: We aren't very much like Jesus in the face of opposition.

Then, perhaps most important of all, we need to seek each other's help, akin to dynamics of an Alcoholics' Anonymous meeting. Alone we haven't the strength to love those who hate us We need grace and community, God's power and others' support to retain the most difficult of all sobrieties that is to walk within a steady strength that enables us to remain warm gracious, forgiving, loving, and joyful in the face of misunderstanding, jealousy, opposition, bitterness, threat and murder.

Speaking personally I consider to be the greatest challenge of my life morally and humanly. How to

love an enemy: How do I not let a jealous glance freeze my heart? How do I not let a bitter word ruin my day? How do I not demonize others when they oppose me? How do I remain sympathetic when I am misunderstood? Worried when I feel threatened? How do I remain sympathetic when I'm misunderstood? How do I remain warm in the face of bitterness? How do I not give into paranoia when I feel threatened? How do I forgive someone who doesn't want my forgiveness? How do I stop myself from slamming the door of my heart in the face of coldness and rejection? How do I forgive others when my own heart is bitter in self –pity? How do I really love and forgive as Jesus did?

I often wonder how Jesus did it .How did he maintain peace of mind, warmth in his heart, graciousness in his speech joy in his life, resiliency in his efforts, the capacity to be grateful, and a sense of humor in the face of misunderstanding , jealousy, hatred and death threats. He did this by recognizing that this was, singularly, the most important challenge of his life and mission, and, under the weight of that imperative, by falling on his knees to ask for the help of the One who can do in us what we can't do for ourselves.

TURNING THE OTHER CHEEK

In the GOSPEL reading, Christ commands us to turn the other cheek. How are we to make sense of the command?

In the GOSPEL Reading last Sunday Christ says that anyone who hates his brother is shut out of heaven. If mere hatred is enough to get a person excluded from heaven how about hatred in action, like physical attack? A schoolyard bully has hate in his heart and hate in action too. If you enable him to keep attacking, you are helping him to hell.

But in the Gospel Reading for this week Christ is asking us to love those who hurt us. How is love shown to a person by helping him towards hell? So in exhorting us to turn the other cheek Christ is not commanding us to be an enabler of people doing bad things. He is exhorting us to love even our enemies as ourselves. If we love our enemies in this way, we will want to help them be what we ourselves want to be people trying to love and obey Christ. Think of Christ's command to turn the other cheek this way, then. Ordinarily, a person given to evil will become worse if he thinks he can hurt others with impunity. That is why to threaten him with reprisal is to tug him back from his own moral destruction. But

sometimes a person is would deter him. And then your best bet is to let him hit you again. If he does, he may finally understand the evil in himself and hate it. So turning the other cheek might make a schoolyard bully worse; but, this attitude expressed in non-violent resistance did help get the British out of India. Christ's command, then, is to do whatever it takes to love our enemies.

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

In today's Gospel Matthew applies to Jesus the prophetic oracle of Isaiah:" The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwell in the land of gloom a light has shone." In like manner, the psalmist assertion that the Lord is my light is echoed in Jesus 'words: "I am the light of the world; the person who follows me will have the light of life.

Christianity is about light. Surrounded by discrimination, oppression and war we Christians challenged to be "united in mind and judgment," and we are directed by God's love to "bring mankind to unity and peace." The light we bring to the world should lead in time to the end of all the world's darkness: the alienation and oppression of peoples, the attacks on human life

and dignity, and disrespect of God's creation" a people living in darkness has seen a great light"

The Church...serves as a leaven and as a kind of soul for human society as it is to be renewed in Christ and transformed into God's family. ...the church not only communicates divine life to men, but in some way casts the reflected light of that life over the entire earth.

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All comments welcome.