

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

**Ministries Modeling God's Love** Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time/A February 23, 2014  
9:00 AM Lev 19:1-2, 17-18; 1 Cor 3:16-23; **Mt 5:38-48** (Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.)

Much ink has been spilled on this topic of “an eye for an eye,” but what we must admit is the Jewish religion understood human nature and addressed the problems of human nature. People are offended in life. That’s part of our experience: we are offended and we want some sort of compensation. However, **sometimes that desire for compensation gets out of hand, so “an eye for an eye” means equal for equal.** Today we deal with all this in the courts, and they are so full of cases they can’t hear them all.

What the Old Testament tried to say is **vengeance is very damaging to the human person. We have to leave vengeance to God.** For our part we have to **love our neighbors, learn how to forgive.** Why? Because **the goal is to become like God,** and that’s how God is. Jesus makes it even more explicit, but it was already there in seminal form in the Old Testament. The problem is we don’t see the big picture, nor do we perceive life the way God does. So Jesus tries to get us to awaken to our smallness, if you want to call it that, our situation, with his rather provocative statements. “If someone hits you in the face, turn the other cheek; if someone wants your tunic, hand over your cloak as well.” “Resist not evil” is the idea, because **when you resist evil you become evil;** you become like your opponent. You would become like your enemy, and pretty soon then you are your enemy.

Jesus has come to lead us somewhere. The goal: God, godliness, **becoming God**—that’s exactly what the Fathers of the Church said. We are to become God. Well, how do we do that? **By becoming like Christ.** He is already the embodiment of godliness, of the Godhead, of divinity. He is; we are becoming. But we have to work at it. We can’t just sit back and wait for some sort of immovable power to get us to change. **We have to work at changing.** We have to see where our weaknesses are. We have to put into practice this new vision that even the Old Testament but also the New brings to us.

**So Christ is the embodiment of this new vision.** In Christ God is active in a way, as far as we know, never before: **promoting forgiveness and reparation for the torn fabric of society, recognizing that everybody is affected by everybody else.** We do not live in a privileged vacuum. We cannot be hermetically sealed from other problems in the world. We are all part of it. So the goal of **Jesus** is not to burden people with some new commandment or requirement that’s impossible. **He is rather trying to elicit our help in his ministry of atonement.** That’s what he has come for. That’s why the New Testament calls him the high priest. That was the role of the high priest in the Old Testament, to bring atonement, to perform the rite of atonement on the Day of Atonement: Yom Kippur. That was all well and good in intention, but it wasn’t really effective in reality. St. Paul would put it this way: if it had been, Christ would not have come.

So Christ has come to make effective this **desire of God to reconcile all people to himself.** And this is a big deal. It means that **we work to let the grace of God transform us.** That sounds like a contradiction, perhaps, that we work to let grace, but that is the way human beings experience God’s grace. It doesn’t come in easily, pleasurably, facily. **It comes in our struggles to be like Christ,** to be in harmony, to see the big picture, to acknowledge our need

for one another. We do not live in isolation. We are not put on this earth to live as individuals. **We are put on this earth to live in a relational life with one another, embodied, again, in the Church.**

The role of the Church is to make this something very visible, tangible for the world. So our goodwill has to go beyond our little world, our little family. It has to go out into the bigger picture, even where there is evil, yes, because **if goodwill never touches the hearts of the evil, then they will remain evil.** Jesus' hope and the hope of God is they will turn from their evil. And they can. We believe they can through the death of Christ. How this can be, we need to think about. It cannot be put in so many words. But as a Church, as a body of believers in Christ, we have to make a communal statement—and we do when we come together for Eucharist—we make a statement of what we believe. We open our hearts and bodies to nourishment, and **we should become visible to the world, so the whole world can hear this word of compassion, this word of goodwill, this word of concern.**

**This is the why the Church has ministries.** This is why we are talking in the narthex these last few weeks about different ministries in our parish. We need to express who we are. We just can't take it for granted. **By serving others the Church is actually evangelizing.** It is making a statement about God, what we believe about God, and how we see God dealing with us. The goal is of course that people believe in God, but even if they don't quite commit themselves to real faith, surrender their lives totally to God, **at least through the ministry of the Church they can have a good opinion of God.** And that's often where faith begins: a good opinion of God, a good feeling about the creation, about even people. So we all have a role to play in this.

That is a motivation Jesus used to get his disciples to shine with goodness: "that others would praise the Father," the Father whose very nature we are to copy: **"Be perfect as your Father is perfect." Model yourselves on the Father.** Tall order? Yes. Impossible? No. We just strive day-by-day. This all fits into the **larger Church**, the work of the diocese, **all the ministries of the diocese.** All are forms of evangelization. All are trying to live out this being perfect as the Father is perfect, **expressing compassion and love for those in need no matter who they are.** Tall order? Yes. Impossible? No. Perhaps already this week you have received **a letter from Bishop Conlon asking you to contribute to this wonderful network of ministries in our diocese: so-called "2014 Service Appeal."** I would ask you to **pray about this enterprise that we share in showing God's goodness to others.**

And as you probably know, in two weeks we begin the season of Lent, actually a week and a half. **Lent is a time for especially reflecting on:** Where am I going? What am I doing? What am I not doing that is pleasing to God? **How do I need to become more aware of the Father whom I am supposed to be following?** It may be difficult to give up certain pleasures, which is a typical Lenten practice, and it is surely praiseworthy to be self-disciplined, but joining with others to help those in need is even more praiseworthy when motivated by the love of God.