

[Readings: Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18; Psalm 103; 1 Cor. 3:16-23; Matt 5:38-48]

I don't remember the movie, whether it was an action film, a war film, or a western. But two groups of men stand ready to fight each other. The leaders of the groups are standing toe to toe against each other. The first man says, "Give it your best shot." So the second man delivers a right hook on his left cheek. When the first man recovers, in the spirit of today's Gospel, he offers the other cheek. So the second man delivers a left hook on his right cheek. The first man recovers a second time, faces the second man, delivers an upper cut, and knocks the second man flat on the floor. The first man's friend asks, "Why did you do that?" The first man replies, "I ran out of cheeks!"

One cold stare invites another. Insult is traded for insult. One punch follows another. Somewhere down the road, there's an exchange of gunfire. Wearying cycles of violence and vengeance spiral through history, each side seeking to deliver the blow that leads to decisive victory. But there's no victory. There's not even a chance of even-stein. Retaliatory justice is never just, because trading pain for pain, loss for loss, never heals anything. Violence only gives birth to more of the same. As Jesus reminds us, "those who live by the sword will die by the sword."

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" sounds like a good proposal. It seeks to bring equity into the game of reprisal, keeping a lid on how far one might go to achieve satisfaction in revenge. You can't take more from the other guy than he took from you. It sounds right. But how does a hurled stone discriminate between a tooth and half a jaw? What if my single bullet, meant to reply to yours, starts a fire that burns down your village? There's no strict sense of justice in the land of loss, no measured steps to take in the wild territory of retribution.

Most of us, of course, won't be reaching for rocks or firearms in our attempts to get even with those who wrong us. We'll find the shaming word, the scorching secret, and hurl that out in the open. We'll start a lawsuit, or just a rumor. We'll steal from the tight-pursed employer, which hurts the boss a little but turns us into thieves.

Even if we do nothing, or say nothing, just carrying the smoldering desire for vengeance in our hearts poisons our capacity to love, to forgive, and to be human. It poisons us.

What would Jesus have us do in the face of the real wrongs perpetrated against us? Jesus expects us to retaliate against wrong -- with good. Ignoring evil isn't the way to fight it, Jesus says. We must overcome evil with the stronger spirit of love. If you're offended, don't return an offense but remain both innocent and vulnerable. If detained unfairly, stay twice as long and strive to make the oppressor a friend. Be generous without keeping a record of what's owed.

Respond to haters with love, and to curses with blessings. This method of reply may sound like madness, entirely out of the question. Where's the justice in it? The reply is that there's no human justice in it, if that's what you're seeking. But there is divine justice in it. Because this is how God deals with us. This is how God deals with us.

This is not an easy task! When our spirits are rattled, when we ourselves are testy because of a difficult situation, and when we fear the anger, retaliation or withdrawal of the person we are concerned about, confrontation takes a lot of courage. And it takes much thoughtful and prayerful preparation.

In today's First Reading, we find a key to effective conversation. Do not do it out of an inner spirit of hatred, or to gain revenge, or out of some grudge that you keep in your heart. Compassionate love recognizes that we ourselves have our own faults and weaknesses and imperfections.

What injustice in your own life keeps you from an open heart? What keeps you stuck in resentment? You belong to God, and with God's love your heart has the capacity to let go and to move on.

Which brings us to the key commands of two of our readings: "Be holy" and "Be perfect." Once again, the English translation is lacking. In the original Hebrew, the verb is not a perfect imperative: "Do this, right now, and be done with it!" It is not something done once and for all.

It is an active progressive verb. It begins in the present and progresses into the future. The same thing with the command of Jesus when He says: "Become perfected as your Heavenly Father is perfect." It is an ongoing action.

We also remember that while we are correcting ourselves and reproofing one another, that there is a delicate balance between enabling one another and empowering one another. We empower when we say, "I'm proud of you that you are getting your act together." We empower when we say, "I'm not going to be your personal ATM anymore!" We sing in our Responsorial Psalm, that the Lord is "kind and merciful," "gracious," "slow to anger and abounding in kindness." Can we not be the same when we correct one another?

Most of us know the first part of the Serenity Prayer: "God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the Courage to change the things I can, and the Wisdom to know the difference."

But this is the original version as it comes to us from Reinhold Niebuhr, a German theologian and pastor:

"God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, Courage to change the things which should be changed, and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."

Most of us don't know that this is only half of his prayer. There is another paragraph that goes with it. Here is the rest of it:

"Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace, taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, *not as I would have it*, trusting that You will make all things right, *if I surrender to Your will*, so that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen."

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday. The time for conversion, for fasting and prayer and almsgiving will have begun.

To what end do we take up these practices? Do we fast because it's healthy -- a periodic way to control our weight? Do we pray in order to prove each year that we can go to daily Mass? Do we give a bit of alms because it's nice to have something to offer up on Holy Thursday?

Do we give up social media because it's pleasant to take a break from the endless images and words that distract us from the kingdom (plus, all our friends are doing it)? None of these reasons, even a bit of weight loss, are necessarily evil. They're practices that will lead the Christian to a bit of holiness. They focus us on God, moving us away from the excesses that may hinder us from virtue.

But God may have something more in store for us. God is proposing a construction project -- a building of a temple of holiness through the restoration of each Christian.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul reminds us that we are temples of God. Through this image, Paul is making a claim about Christian identity. The Temple in Jerusalem is the place of God's dwelling on earth. The Church is a temple, the dwelling place of the Spirit. Each baptized Christian is a stone in this temple, the presence of God made available to men and women.

If we are to be the temple of God, the presence of the Spirit, we must give up practices of self-deception, chasing the wisdom of the world rather than the foolishness of God. We must give ourselves over entirely to the stonemason, Jesus Christ, who comes to smooth out rough edges, placing us in communion with every member of the Church.

Lent, in this sense, is a time of honest discernment. The foolish stonemason looks at a crumbling stone and says, "It will likely be OK." It is the wise builder who is honest, who sees the defects and does something about it.

We are broken and crumbling stones. Not just me, not just you, but the whole Church. In the coming weeks, the Divine Stonemason, with His typical kindness and mercifulness, will begin to reconstruct this dusty and desolate temple. Will we let Him get to work on us? AMEN!