

[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 first 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 resentfulness? 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.

My mantra last year was "I delight in my imperfection." I could not say this five years ago. We also remember that while we are correcting ourselves and reproving one another, that there is a delicate balance between enabling one another and empowering one another. 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."

I conclude with another version of the Serenity Prayer which comes from one of my favorite and humorous Jesuit priests, Fr. James Martin, author of *Between Heaven and Mirth*:

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change, which is pretty much everyone, since I'm clearly not you, God. At least not the last time I checked.

“And while you’re at it, God, please give me the courage to change what I need to change about myself, which is frankly a lot, since, once again, I’m not you, which means I’m not perfect.

“It’s better for me to focus on changing myself, God, than to worry about changing other people, who, as you’ll no doubt remember me saying, I can’t change anyway.

“Finally, God, give me the wisdom to just be quiet whenever I think that I’m clearly smarter than everyone else in the room, that no one knows what they’re talking about except me, or that I alone have all the answers. Basically, God, grant me the wisdom to remember that I’m not you.” AMEN!