

Epiphany 7
St. Matthew 5:38-48
February 19th, 2017
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

The Other Cheek!

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be Children of your Father in heaven..."

For the most part, and with most neighbors, it is easy to love them, at least *like* them. However, those who have hurt me or done me wrong, forget about it. They are clearly enemies.

Enemies are those hard-core cases whose behavior seems unredeemable, hurtful, beyond forgiveness. These dark souls unjustly persecute us; borrow from us and do not repay us; fight and wound us; rob from us; cheat us and maybe even kill us. They are contrary to almost everything we stand for and believe in. They are self-serving and self-centered. Their darkness is unrelenting and unforgiving, and in the worst cases, lacking in human emotion and unable to empathize with others. They are like a cat toying with its prey, not to insult cats, because these empty shells are far worse.

Do you have an enemy like that? Usually everyone has bumped into such a lowly, miserable excuse for wasting the oxygen the rest of us breathe. I know, I have had a few, and in the few years of my experience as a priest, I have heard plenty of tales of these demons who cast long shadows in our lives. Are you thinking of an enemy in your life from the past, or is there such an awful being in the present? These creatures seek to

destroy the lives of others for their own pleasure and then walk over you and shove their victory in your face. Who is your enemy? Are they still lurking in the shadows? Does your blood boil at the mention of their name? Do you resent the fear and butterflies in your stomach when you encounter them in the town-square?

We likely know our enemies all too well, and have given over far too much power to them, from our time and energy to worrying about them and hating them for what they have done to us. Enemies drag us down to their level when they seduce us into their games and negativity. Now who is my enemy?

But how do you deal with them? How can you overcome them? How can you defeat them in their tracks? What is the secret of conquering and vanquishing your enemy? What is a Christian to do?

Well, according to the words of Jesus in today's Gospel, *turn the other cheek.*

Turn the other cheek? Leave myself vulnerable to their evil?
Why?

Simply put, two wrongs don't make a right. As Christians, we learn to not return evil for evil, but instead to shake up the game and refuse to play it. We are called to be the adults in the room. Someone might say, only a whimp would turn the other cheek, but if you think about it, this takes courage.

Being a Christian is hard stuff. It is not easy to turn the other cheek. But I remember Jesus himself on the road to Calvary, turning the other cheek, exposing his back to the smiters, taking the medicine of hatred and following his own advice,

and he triumphed over all this evil on the cross, the ultimate cheek turning—out of love.

Jesus calls us to a new level of moral and ethical behavior, one grounded in love: we are to literally love the unlovable. We are to forgive as we have been forgiven. Love does heal division and brokenness if you give it a chance. The cross of Christ, which we are called to take up, will give us the power to triumph over the evil, no matter how hard the personal pain gets.

Jesus clearly tells us to *love our enemies* and to *pray for them*. **Love and Prayer.** These do not make for enemies. These make friends. They are powerful tools to overturn the tables and make a fresh beginning.

You see, it is literally impossible to pray for someone and have them remain an enemy. I know, I have tried it. I prayed for days and months and the prayers changed me and changed my view of others, as well as myself. You can't continue to hate someone you pray for. When you try to love someone, the hatred is replaced with genuine love. And this is not a love blind to the past, or even the hurts which may have injured us greatly. This is a love like God's that finds the capacity to forgive as we have been forgiven. And then we can move on with life, instead of living as a prisoner of our dislike and even hatred and hurt about our enemies. We can allow our enemies to control our lives and our futures if we get stuck in the pattern of hating them. Better to live free and not be drawn into their games or down to their level.

And a low level it is. You may not be able to change your enemy, but you can change yourself! Even though it may not seem like it at first, you are in control of your life and of your

reactions to people around you. Let it go. Let go of your anger and hurt. What good are they doing you? They're only increasing the acid in your stomach and the stress on your heart, not to mention your blood pressure.

Who is my enemy? We share this Island home with those we call or assume are our enemies. They breathe the same air, and drink the same water. God is God over all of us, not just the righteous and the good sheep. God, as we know, loves the lost sheep and the Prodigal Son. God even loved the thief who hung on a cross next to him outside the Wall of Jerusalem on Good Friday. *"For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."* We might ask at this juncture, what makes a Christian different from the heathen enemy who seeks to ruin us?

What do you think? I believe a Christian is different because they know better than to return evil for evil. Christians know the power of love and prayer to change themselves and the world they live in. Christians are not captives of the power struggles of this life. There is no need to lord anything over anyone. You do not need to prove yourself to anyone. You are already proven. You are already loved. You are already accepted. A Christian knows this and is able to return good in the face of hurt. You do loan things to others because you know things don't belong to you anyway. If someone needs a coat so bad that they take yours, find out what else they need and give it to them. That is what being a fellow traveler and neighbor is all about.

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth sounds like fair and real justice. But this is a very human way of looking at things. When a tooth is knocked out in a fight, does it really make it better that the person who hit you lost their tooth as a punishment? And if your eye gets poked out, does it make

everything better if the offending party's eye is plucked out? Do two people, one without teeth and one person half blind make the world a better, more just place? I have never heard anyone say that the death penalty makes them feel better after it has been administered. It surely never balances the loss or restores the loved one to life who has died. Eye for an eye justice may feel good or seem like justice for the moment, but it takes the bigger person to forgive and a strong person to repent and live with the knowledge of the harm they have caused. Consider the Christian response of the members of Mother Emanuel Church several years ago, after the awful murder by the racist man of the innocent people holding a Bible Study, who had just extended him a place in their midst and showed him kindness and hospitality. No one called for the same evil to be visited on this tortured but evil soul. *They forgave him from the start.* When you are able to forgive, then the world does become a better place. What a powerful witness this was instead of returning hate for hate. At the heart of this is the message of Jesus to turn the other cheek.

Love your enemies. Turn the other cheek? What makes you different from everyone else as Christians? What sets you apart?

You can be very angry with another person. You can feel very hurt by them, but when viewed more objectively, we have to own our own responsibility for the hurt. It isn't as hard to turn the other cheek as you might think!

Who is my real enemy? My worst Enemy? Over the years I have wondered about the idea of who is my enemy. Some people emerged on my list as enemies. They did bad things to me. But after thoughtful consideration, much prayer and a lifetime of experience, I have come to know who really is my worst enemy,

and *it is myself*. This is one of the greatest insights you can come to.

I realize that I often invited the harm to come to me, by my own poor choices, my own lack of action, or poor decisions I have made. I came to take responsibility for my own behavior and was freed to forgive those who I perceived had wronged me. Is the hurt still there? Yes, but greatly diminished. It no longer controls me. It no longer consumes my attention or emotions. Life, I learned, is not fair. Human justice is flawed and can hurt and disappoint as much as the crime against you. And then there is God. Put God in control. Let God judge, it is God's job, not yours.

"For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"

Try a little prayer and love. Hold your enemies in your prayers and they will be transformed before your eyes! And turn the other cheek. AMEN