

[1 Sam 26:2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23; Psalm 103; 1 Cor. 15:45-49; Luke 6:27-38]

Most of us have no quarrel with most of the teachings of Jesus. When He says love one another and welcome little children, and peace I leave with you, we find nothing difficult or objectionable in these sayings. Most of what Jesus has to say sounds like good moral advice or happy and reassuring thoughts. We're content to call Him Lord and follow his way when that way is congenial to the way we already want to go.

However, in the time of Jesus there were plenty of folks who were pleased to leave their jobs (which they didn't much care for anyway) and follow Him around (which occasionally led to a free lunch) and listen to His teachings (which confirmed what they already believed about rich people and religious leaders in general). And they continued to do so until they ran hard up against the so-called "harsh sayings" of Jesus, which were so displeasing that most of His followers turned on their heels and went home harrumphing about Him after that.

When Jesus tells us to be like the lilies and don't worry so much, we sigh and think it's a lovely idea. But when Jesus says love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and bless those who curse you, what are we to make of that? For some of us, at least, these sayings are so ridiculous and impossible to take seriously that we have to presume they've lost something in the translation. When Jesus says "enemies," He doesn't mean the people who intend us harm, obviously. And when He talks about "doing good" to people who hate us, surely He implies not actually being kind or thoughtful or helpful to them.

After all, it's the very definition of an enemy to be the person who's out to get you, and such a person is to be avoided or defeated at all costs. In certain cases, such a person should even be killed, we reason. So Jesus can't mean love your enemies. He must mean something else! Right? No, He doesn't!

We have grown used to qualifying and limiting our responsibility to the holy will of God. For example, when we practice compassion, we tend to reserve it for those who "deserve" our compassion. Such people didn't participate in the circumstances of their misfortune, for instance.

So we may extend compassion to a person who is ill because of exposure to asbestos, but not to a smoker who has lung cancer. We show mercy to the hurricane victim, but not to the alcoholic who has developed diabetes.

We may do the same with our forgiveness. We may forgive people who have wronged us and confessed their behavior and worked to amend the damage, but not the person who never says he or she is sorry. When we qualify our responses in this way, we are practicing human justice, but we are not imitating the Lord who felt compassion for the people of Jerusalem who would shout for His crucifixion the next day, or who forgave those who were in the act of putting Him to death because they were so ignorant.

When we practice human justice, expecting an eye for an eye, loving our friends and hating our enemies, repaying people in kind for what they do, nothing is accomplished according to the reign of God. The reign of God is extended when God's will is done and something truly divine is allowed to come to life among us. Heavenly justice is so much grander than just evening out the score; it enlarges our own hearts and vision when we have the courage to participate in it.

What would it have gained David to seize the moment and destroy his enemy Saul while he slept? It would have solved a problem he had, surely. It would have eliminated a man who was bent on killing him. But David has been anointed by a prophet to be a king, and that means he has to show a kingly sensibility about the origins and privileges of power. Knowing that a king rules by divine decree and not his own pleasure, David honors King Saul even in this dangerous hour. In turn, Saul perceives that David is indeed greater, more kingly, and more deserving of divine favor than he is himself. David grows in stature and grace in the eyes of his men, and even under the steady gaze of his enemy. David wins more than the life of his enemy in this encounter.

The only way we, too, can grow and expand in grace and knowledge of the ways of God is to practice them. When we do, the kingdom Jesus announced "leans" into view and into our reality, not simply through what is decent and legal

by earthly standards, but when we live by a higher rule altogether. When we get above who's right and who's wrong and stop judging and condemning others according to their actions, what we see from God's-eye view might astound us!

Daily life offers countless opportunities to put this Sunday's gospel into practice. Can I think of one clear-cut example from the past week in which I've loved an enemy or done good to someone who hates me? How about a recent time when I failed to do that?

Loving others does not mean being available for abuse. What have I learned in my life about being loving in the midst of conflict?

Often, seemingly loving behaviors are simply efforts at manipulation or a "quid pro quo" – I will do this for you if you do this for me. What can I do in my own life to make my actions more purely loving?

We may balk at the idea that we ought to adjust our response to be like God's because, after all, who among us is like God? We have to remember that love, compassion, and forgiveness are not about what we feel but how we choose. These are divine attributes and as such do not properly belong to us.

Even Jesus didn't say, "I forgive you," to His enemies from the cross; He asked God to forgive them. When our emotions don't line up with our Christian responsibility to be as God is, then we can choose to love and forgive not by our own weak and limited authority but by the limitless power of God. For God does indeed love those who have set themselves against God's own divine will; God does have mercy on those unworthy of compassion; and God does forgive those who are unforgivable. We don't have to look farther than in the mirror to know what that means for us. If we want to be counted as the children of God, adopting heavenly values is the quickest way to embrace that identity. Let's not pray for God to forgive us as WE forgive, but to forgive as GOD forgives! AMEN!