

Homily for February 18, 2001
7th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle C

By Father Charles Bowes

1 Samuel 26:2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23
1 Corinthians 15:45-49
Luke 6:27-38

We won't know if we can forgive until we get there and invite the invasion of God.

Perhaps no other passage in the gospels better presents an overall perspective of the teaching of Jesus given us by Saint Luke's Gospel than today's reading from chapter 6. Saint Luke's gospel is referred to as the "gospel of absolute renunciation" – and there is perhaps no better illustration of this and no other passage more at odds with our customary ways of handling other people.

One sentence after another sounds so crazy and pounds us with an instruction that goes against the grain of what we have long come to feel and believe. "Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who abuse you." ... "Judge not...condemn not...forgive." Who can live these teachings? Can you imagine what our enemies would do to us if we didn't fight them? Doesn't experience demonstrate that, if you "turn the other cheek," people will likely hit you there, too? Isn't it true that when you start giving to beggars they become more dependent? If you love people with no expectations of them, isn't that giving them a green

light to take advantage of us? When it comes to not judging people, where would society be if we didn't have our courts and prisons?

We could argue with Jesus on every one of his proposals, and we could do so reasonably in the light of logic and common sense. Nothing Jesus proposes in this gospel narrative makes sense in the natural order of things. The point here, however, is that there is a new order of things inaugurated in the death and resurrection of Jesus – in this radical inbreak of God's love into the human by human beings toward one another.

Keep in mind that Saint Luke is writing this gospel for a Gentile audience near the end of the first century. One of the basic assumptions of the ancient culture regarding the economy, the way goods and services are exchanged, was the Greek notion of *charis* – which means benefit, credit, grace. The economy of the Graeco-Roman world turned on the notion that this credit or grace or benefit was kept in constant circulation. God, the Holy, the Divine, would "grace" – provide benefits for – us humans, who would in turn respond, give thanks, by acknowledging such favors through gifts or financial contributions to the temple worship. This would mean, in the concrete, better temples, more construction jobs, better surroundings within the temple, etc. The glory of God would be

enhanced, and this would, in turn, effect better benefactions from the Holy, from God, on us humans. The cycle was a constant round of gift-giving and growth. The ancient city understood its continued success to rely upon such cycles of gift-giving and thanksgiving. It was a kind of tit-for-tat.

Now, into this existing economic vision comes Saint Luke's gospel. The response of that early Christian community is no longer to be tit-for-tat – God rubs my back, and I in turn do the equivalent – no more. Rather, the responsible action of a Christian is to be as generous as God – to pick up where God leaves off so to speak, to love still more, to forgive unceasingly – in short, to establish a new economy not founded upon an eye for an eye or a gift for a gift – but to expand the limits of human life to become the limits of our very God – limitless – ocean. And this new economy of unending and never-ceasing love and forgiveness is not just on the spiritual plain – it has practical consequences even to the point of lending money to those who have no hope of repayment.

The bottom line is, we do what we do because we are disciples of Jesus, not because there is an inherent advantage to doing it. Some people may be moved or even converted by our imitation of divine generosity, but many will not. We are generous with our love because we are created anew in love – empowered by the Risen Lord's Spirit, and whether we can do this we won't really know until we get there – experience the moment, the challenge to forgive in the face of horrendous odds, to trust that we will have the prudence and know when to resist abuse and when to love.

The ethic of reciprocity meets a bad end in this Sermon on the Plain. Followers of Jesus cannot limit their generosity to those in a position and with a disposition to return the favor. Just as God's mercy

overflows into our lives unbounded by our modest limitations to receive it, so our response to those in need is to be flagrant, out-sized and outrageous.

And as we love in this fashion, something happens deep inside us: our perceptions change dramatically; the world and other people simply look different – in effect, we have opened ourselves to receive the invasion of God and begin to act and live in that spirit of the Risen Lord. Can we do it? We won't know until we get there and in the midst of the struggle invite our God in the name of Jesus to be with us precisely where we feel so broken and angry and hurt.

The Eucharist we now celebrate is in a sense an anticipation of the Great Banquet, which is yet to come – where the table is set lavishly with all the good things – forgiveness and peace forever.

An anonymous prisoner of Ravensbrück concentration camp left this prayer text next to the body of a dead child. Its petition still surpasses understanding unless one stands with open ears and hearts under the cross and recognizes that a power greater than oneself is at work and makes these words possible. Could these words, this prayer, be ours? It reads this way: "Oh Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us; remember the fruits we have brought, thanks to this suffering – our comradeship, our loyalty, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart that has grown out of all this; and when they come to judgment, let all the faults which we have borne be their forgiveness."

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