



by Mary M. McGlone

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When I was a high school sophomore, we had a teacher that some of us disliked. When I complained to my mom, she told me that I must pray for the teacher. When I repeated my grumbling days later, Mom asked if I had done what she said. I said, “Yes.” In response to her raised eyebrows, I continued, “It was nearly impossible, but, yes, I am praying for her ... to have a happy death before the end of the semester.” With a well-controlled facial expression, Mom told me that was not exactly what she had meant.

What is Jesus asking when he tells us to pray for those who mistreat us? It seems that when I pray for people with whom I disagree mightily, my best efforts lead me to pray that they will become better people. Ultimately, I often pray that they will learn to see things the way I do. Where does that leave me? I find myself standing solidly in the shoes of the Pharisee whom Jesus described as praying his own praises while a tax collector stood nearby asking for mercy (Luke 18:9-14).

Maybe the way around this trap is to learn the prayer of that tax collector. When I look at that parable together with what Jesus is teaching in today’s reading, I come up with the following prayer of the tax collector: When someone mistreats you, pray, “O Lord, be merciful to me a sinner” (v. 13). If I do that, at the very least, I will be praying to become a bigger person.

If we think about it, everything Jesus said about dealing with adversaries comes down to nonviolent responses to aggression. Fleshing out the classic theory espoused centuries later by Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesus suggests responses in which the person offended refuses to be a victim and simultaneously treats the aggressor with dignity.

Jesus does a fair amount of repetition in this segment of his sermon. He seems to be trying to get his point across to beginners, or maybe sophomore disciples. As a good teacher, he outlines specific steps to take. If you get slapped or someone steals the shirt off your back, he says, “Don’t hit back, don’t hold back.” When you see the same beggar five days in a row, he says, “Go ahead and give her something — you don’t have to buy designer coffee today.” When you see a student at school flashing your favorite pen, just look at him and say “Great pen, I loved it when I got to use it! Enjoy it while you can.” (That will keep the kid wondering...)

So far, Jesus has been talking about what to do with people who are bullies or simply irritating. Then he goes for the gold, “Love your enemies and do good to them.” That sounds like we are supposed to go out of our way to treat mean people with kindness. To explain this, Jesus says, “Stop judging ... stop condemning ... forgive.”

We might understand this as a geography lesson. Jesus is telling us to stop standing on the heights, looking down at others. In order to deal with others in Jesus’ terms, we have to move into their turf and see from their perspective. We have to become insiders to one another. We can’t begin to “get it” about someone until we love them. The minute we call someone “enemy” or judge him or her, we are admitting our own unwillingness to love, our unwillingness to see beyond our own point of view.

The great twist in this teaching is that Jesus is not simply telling us how to build a better, peaceful world. This is more than a personal growth plan. In this teaching, Jesus is revealing the only path to salvation. Loving the enemy, doing good to those who harm us is the only way to share his mission and life. As he says, sinners do lots of good things and are quite pleased with themselves for it. But they are oblivious to Jesus’ formula for blessedness.

This is a difficult lesson for the sophomore disciples that most of us are. Jesus is giving us a theory and some very concrete suggested practices to put it into action. But he wouldn’t propose it if it were impossible.

Jesus tells us to pray for our enemies. If we pray to see them as he does, that will give God enough to work with. Then with God's grace, and perhaps much to our surprise, we will find ourselves thinking and doing things we would have thought impossible.

### **1 SAMUEL 26:2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23**

This is such a good story that Samuel tells it twice — or at least he tells this one after he has recounted a very similar incident in 1 Samuel 24. If you were Saul and if you could choose, you might prefer people hear this one than the other. In this one, David finds Saul asleep and spares his life. In the previous one, David snuck up on Saul who was so concentrated on relieving himself that he didn't even perceive David's presence or notice it when David cut off a piece of his robe. In both stories, David comes off as a virtuous, unjustly persecuted hero and Saul something of a jealous dolt.

The background to this story begins when David was a young boy and the prophet Samuel secretly anointed him as King Saul's successor. At the time, David's greatest talents were playing the harp and wielding his shepherd's slingshot. When Saul made him a military commander, David's success sent Saul into a murderous rage. The incidents in which David refused to kill Saul took place while Saul was seeking to kill him.

This story reveals David's character and theology. There is no doubt that his life was in danger and that Saul would have rewarded anyone who killed him. Nevertheless, when Saul fell unwittingly under David's power, David refused to harm him out of respect for the fact that God had appointed him.

It is not that David had taken a vow of nonviolence. His popularity was partially due to the fact that he had slain more enemies than Saul. But David believed that God had chosen Saul and only God had the right to remove him from office or take his life. Confronted with the evidence of David's honor and refusal to take revenge, Saul repented and no longer sought David's life. David did not succeed to the throne until Saul had been killed in battle.

The story of David sparing Saul offers historical background to Jesus' teaching about love of enemies. Although David may not have been full of affection for Saul, he respected God's sole right to give him life or death (26:10). David's clemency engendered greater respect than killing Saul would have brought. David chose the

power of mercy and reverence over the lesser power of violence and thereby proved himself the stronger of the two men.

When we relate this story to the signs of our times, we should not forget that in August 2018, Pope Francis changed the official teaching of the Catechism of the Catholic Church to condemn the death penalty under all circumstances. The revised catechism teaching reads: “The death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person,” going on to say that the Catholic Church “works with determination for its abolition worldwide” (#2267). Francis is taking us beyond David’s morality and pushing us to be formed by the teaching we will hear in today’s Gospel.

### **PSALM 103: 1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13**

“The Lord is kind and merciful.”

The refrain we sing today is actually part of a short creed from Psalm 103. When we recite the Creed in the eucharistic celebration, we sometimes say that we “pray” it. Seeing this line as a creed invites us to reflect on why we pray or recite any creed.

The profession of faith we proclaim each Sunday is placed just after the Liturgy of the Word as a response to the Scriptures we have heard. After reflecting on the word, we recite the Creed to affirm the core of our faith. In Jesus’ day, the essential creed was the Shema which originally consisted simply of the verse, “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone!” (Deuteronomy 6:4). In between that and the much longer and more dogmatic Nicene Creed, we have numerous scriptural creeds such as the one we heard two weeks ago from Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7. All of them remind us of the core of our faith, each one approaching it from a different angle.

Singing “The Lord is kind and merciful” makes a statement about God and also about our relationship to God. As the psalm develops, everything it says elaborates on that line in one way or another.

In the first stanza, we summon our deepest, most personal selves to give praise by saying, “Bless the Lord, O my soul.” The Hebrew word for soul, *nephesh*, refers to that dimension of ourselves that has life and identifies us as the unique being we each are. By praying this stanza, we call ourselves to bless God from the very depths of our personal being. No one else can bless God in the particular and

personal way we do when we pray from our soul and entire being. And yet, when we bless God together in our assembly, we come together in a unique unity with one another as well as with God.

In the other three stanzas of the psalm, we recount some of the ways God demonstrates kindness and mercy. Each of them is an expression of God's covenant love, a love that will never give up on us no matter how far we may stray.

## **1 CORINTHIANS 15:45-49**

In this section of his reflection on the resurrection of the dead, Paul is trying to help the Corinthians understand resurrection in ways that go beyond their typical thought patterns. Greek philosophy had a generally poor opinion of the physical world in comparison to what they saw as spiritual.

Therefore, the idea that a dead person would be brought back to bodily life rather than simply freed from the confines of limited, corruptible bodily existence seemed primitive and actually rather disgusting to people who understood resurrection as the revivification of a corpse. (They were thinking more in terms of Halloween than Easter.) Nevertheless, the resurrection of the body — as we proclaim in the Apostles' Creed — was vitally important to Paul. His challenge was to get people to think beyond their crude categories.

Essential to his argument is the idea that resurrection is transformation, not resuscitation. That is what he is driving at in the distinction between Adam and Christ. Adam represents earthy life with all its frailty and potential. That material life is exactly what Christ took on in the incarnation, and frail as it is, Paul wants us to remember that God took it on in love and thereby revealed its value.

At the same time, Paul sees human potential as greater than Adam, greater than just material life. That is why when he looks to Genesis, Paul does not refer to God's creation of humanity in the divine image, but rather the creation of Adam from the earth. Paul is looking at resurrection as the culmination of growing in the divine image, a transformation that happens through grace, not a return to a lost perfection.

As explained by the Belgian monks who wrote the series *Days of the Lord*, "This text steadfastly insists on the double solidarity of all people in their earthly condition and in Jesus Christ raised from the dead." We are earthly children of Adam who are

invited to be enlivened by Christ.

Today, when not many of us are involved in philosophical debates with Platonists and their ilk, we might ask what difference all of this makes to us. Paul's insistence on the resurrection/transformation of the body has something in common with today's psalm's awareness of our uniqueness as individual persons. The resurrection of the body is a way of affirming that each of us in the body of Christ is an individual, beloved and loving. That indicates that we each become more individuated as we become more related to others in community. When we consider this, we can sense an affinity between Paul's teaching on the resurrection and John's presentation of Christ's prayer asking that we all be one in him as he is in the Father (John 17:21).

### **LUKE 6:27-38**

"To those who hear I say, love your enemies."

In today's Gospel, as last week, we find ourselves listening to Jesus addressing us directly as his disciples. Now, he is giving concrete examples of what he taught with his eight blessings and woes. If those seemed somewhat theoretical, he now gets right down to attitudes and actions, telling us how to respond to the woeful events of life and transform them into occasions of grace and therefore blessings.

One commentator on today's Gospel suggests that it was part of Jesus' autobiography. Thus, if we want to understand what he meant, we can look to how he lived the advice he was handing out. We can find instances of the actions Jesus described at different moments of his life, and especially in the account of his passion when he uttered one of his most famous prayers: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do"(23:34)

This reading is particularly apt for February 24, the beginning of the last week of Black History Month. One of the greatest commentaries we have on Jesus' teaching in this Gospel can be found in the address Martin Luther King, Jr. gave when he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

Calling upon the whole human family in the way Jesus called on his disciples, King said, "[We] must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love." Like Jesus, King preached from experience. Having been arrested nine times, stabbed and stoned, he continued to preach nonviolence. In the face of such persecution, he proclaimed, "I

have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.”

Jesus’ concrete descriptions of ways to love the enemy explain the attitude and activities of the blessed ones who weep because they share God’s own concern for the world. They not only weep, but they are willing to stand with the poor and the hungry to the point of being persecuted on account of the Son of Man. They continue to share Martin Luther King’s faith that “what self-centered [people] have torn down, [people who are] other centered can build up. ... and nonviolent redemptive good will proclaim the rule of the land.”

For over two millennia, the Lord has addressed his disciples in the words of today’s Gospel, “To you who hear I say, love your enemies.” We must have the audacity to believe it is possible. Only this love can redeem us and our world.

## **Planning: Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By Lawrence Mick

It is a shame we don’t hear today’s readings every year. In an age of war, violence, hatred and discrimination, these texts call us to a deep conversion of heart.

In the first reading, David spares Saul’s life, even though Saul was seeking to kill David. In the Gospel, Jesus commands us to “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” How well do you think Christians follow those commands?

The reason these readings seem hard to swallow is that they put in sharp relief the ways of God that Jesus reveals to us. God loves everything that God has made and especially every person God has created. That love is universal and unconditional. Jesus calls us to imitate God’s way of loving. That sounds nice until we come to those who oppose us, those who disagree with us, those who hurt us, or those who want us dead. Then, we generally find God’s way of loving just too much to stomach.

We much prefer to set our own standards for loving people based on whether we judge them worthy of our love. We make our love conditional on other people doing

what we want or what we think they should do. Jesus addresses this directly, noting that God “is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” So Jesus commands us: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

The second reading shows us how to move in that direction. Paul says, “The first man, Adam, became a living being, the last Adam a life-giving spirit. But the spiritual was not first; rather the natural and then the spiritual.” He calls us to shift from our natural instincts to spiritual ones: “Just as we have borne the image of the earthly one, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one.” It is not easy, but God’s grace makes it possible.

How can you call your community to pray for that grace and to embrace the challenges Jesus puts before us? Can you think of any songs that call us to love our enemies? They don’t seem very common, which indicates how carefully we ignore Jesus’ example and command. Can you craft petitions that pray for the courage and grace to love those who don’t love us? There are lots of categories that might be addressed in such prayers: political opponents, workers and bosses, different races, foreign enemies, refugees and immigrants, the rich and the poor, etc.

Next week brings us to Ash Wednesday (March 6). This would be a good Sunday to collect and burn palms to make the ashes we will use that day. People can still bring palms in next week, but it may be easier for those doing the burning and pulverizing to have a little more time to prepare.

## **Prayers: Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By Joan DeMarchant\_

### **Introduction**

Today’s readings seem especially pertinent to us living in a climate of sarcasm and insults, offensiveness and bullying, violence and hatred. Sparing — let alone forgiving and loving — one’s perceived enemies, or refusing to judge others is hardly “natural” to most of us. But God sees it differently, and we are faced with the choice of whether we will too. Considering what this requires of us is a good way to enter the immanent season of Lent.



## **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you challenge us to move beyond our natural inclinations: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you confront us with provocative and challenging words: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to be people of unlimited love, mercy and forgiveness: Lord, have mercy.

## **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Let us pray now for the world's needs and that we may be the people God calls us to be.

**Minister** For all baptized Christians, may we witness to an alternate way of living and loving in a negative, defensive world, we pray:

- For the United Nations and other institutions, programs and individuals that promote world-wide cooperation and collaboration, we pray:
- For national policies that promote diplomacy over war, justice over oppression, restoration over retribution, and equality over dominance, we pray:
- For national budgets that prioritize the needs of the poor, education, infrastructure and affordable health care over the instruments of war, we pray:
- For those we consider our enemies, those who hate or hurt us, those who have significantly different views or values, and those who simply irritate us; and for the courage to listen to them with open hearts and minds, we pray:
- For the determination to confront injustice without condemning others and the courage to explore our own negativity and sinfulness, we pray:

**Presider** God of mercy and unconditional love, we live in a world that often seems to be falling apart. It is easy to be caught up in darkness and forget that we are called to respond in love and forgiveness, kindness and generosity. Empower us to live according to the gifts you give us for the good of the world. We pray in the name of your Son, who gives us a new commandment. Amen.

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