

Cycle A Homily -- 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Focus on Matthew 5:38-48
February 19-20, 2011

Think about the many challenges we face in a given day. Then think about the challenges we face over time – those things that take a week, a month, several months, a year, or even a number of years to work through.

Today's Gospel issues a challenge that takes an entire lifetime to accomplish. It's the challenge to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us. And before we burden ourselves into thinking we can accomplish the challenge on our own, it is much wiser to remind ourselves that we can only meet the challenge with plenty of help from the Lord. And we'll find ourselves starting over many times to reach the top of the mountain. Just when we think we've made it, we find ourselves at the bottom starting all over.

Thinking about the challenge of today's Gospel leads me to share a number of thoughts I've been reflecting about. How the teaching of Jesus contrasts the way the world usually operates! Jesus teaches us to love our enemies. He teaches us to pray for our persecutors. That's a formidable task!

There is another place in the Bible that sheds some light on this. I share it with you some quotations in my Pastor's Column published in today's bulletin, so you can read it this week. It is where Saint Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, chapter 12, verse 20: **"...IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING, YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD."** (The image that leaves in one's mind leaves an impact, doesn't it?)

Maybe the starting point for loving one's enemy is a matter of simply coming to terms with reality. When I did my internship before I was ordained a priest, my supervisor used to say something that I did not understand at the time. I don't know if he was quoting somebody, or if he was just saying this on his own. But he used to say: **"If we truly do our job well we're bound to make enemies somewhere along the way."** We may not be sure who said that. But I've learned as time goes on reality proves that it is very true. I'm very sure many people here today have learned the same thing, even if it is unpleasant.

President's Day is coming on Monday. Several presidents had things to say about enemies.

Abraham Lincoln served as our president during the difficult challenges of the Civil War. He said: "The best way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend." I believe Lincoln's quote here ties in with what St. Paul said about giving one's enemy something to eat and drink, but Lincoln didn't say anything about heaping burning coals on anyone's head. Perhaps we find Lincoln's advice much easier said than done.

Reality reminds us that not even Jesus could befriend everyone. He was crucified. Abe Lincoln could not win the friendship of everyone. He was assassinated. There is always a price to pay for standing for something. Of course, you've heard it said that if we fail to stand for something we will fall for anything!

Another president who was very controversial in his time personalized his own experience and left this memorable quotation: **“Always remember, others may hate you. But those who hate you don't win unless you hate them. And then you destroy yourself.”** Even if Nixon was controversial, his statement carries plenty of truth. The problem is that we tend to have to keep re-learning how true it is over and over again!

I believe these things give us plenty to ponder, plenty to pray about when it comes to trying to meet the challenge to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors. As I mentioned earlier, I provided these quotations in my Pastor's Column in today's bulletin.

May we pray for each other in our efforts to live the teachings of the Gospel that are especially difficult to meet.