

SUNDAY 7-A (Homily 02)

“Be Holy as God is Holy”

(Lev 19:1-2, 17-18; Ps 103; 1 Cor 3:16-23; Mt 5:38-48)

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A priest and a cowboy were riding along. The cowboy was not only talking incessantly, he did not listen to a thing the priest was trying to say. Finally in desperation, the priest told the cowboy that if he could say the *Our Father* from beginning to end without stopping, he would give him his horse. The cowboy accepted the bet, and started to recite the prayer, but after two sentences he asked, “Do I get the saddle too?”

The message of the readings today is to go far beyond the faith and piety of the cowboy. We are to be holy as God is holy.

The book of Leviticus is very clear in teaching this message: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”

St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians says the same thing in a different way. “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” Paul goes on to add, “For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.”

From two great sources, then, we have the same message. Our destiny and our identity as baptized Christians, as disciples and followers of Jesus, is to be holy as God is holy. What an invitation and what a challenge. Certainly it is an invitation to look more closely at what that holiness is and what it looks like in our lives. The readings provide us with much of that information.

First of all, what we find in the readings may surprise us. The average Christian is accustomed to thinking of holiness more in terms of piety, prayer, morality and sexual purity.

To the contrary, holiness for Leviticus is all about forgiveness, about letting go of resentment, hate and the desire for revenge. We are also to have the courage to offer honest and caring feedback to others when they are obviously doing something wrong. That could also be seen as discipline for our youth. That, too, is a form of holiness.

In the end, to be holy is to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. As you may

recognize, that is one of laws that Jesus lifted out of the Old Testament to put together with the other law to “Love the Lord your God,” to form the Great Commandment that he taught his disciples. He was teaching them to be holy as he was holy.

In the Gospel, Jesus goes on to explain more fully what holiness is. Our morality must surpass the legalistic morality of the Old Testament. The teaching, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” was actually an attempt to limit the amount of violence in the mentality of the people of that time. One was not to exact more revenge than was called for by the offense. That law had a good intention, but was terribly limited in its scope.

Jesus takes up that law and transcends it, teaching us that holiness is living the law of love, of forgiveness, and in the end, yes, even love for our enemies. We are to do good to those who harm us, to speak well of them, and pray for them. The saying that ends the gospel, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,” could be rendered, “Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate.”

Along that same line, the Psalm for today provides us with one of the best descriptions of the God that we are to be like to be found in the Old Testament. We read, “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.” It even dares to reverse the teaching of Jesus above and declares, “As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.” In that sense, the psalm compares God to us.

So the teaching is clear. We are to be holy as God is holy. We are to be Spirit filled temples of God, forgiving those who hurt us, rebuking those who err and above all, even loving our enemies.

Jesus on the cross is the best example of his own teaching. He was forgiving those who were crucifying him. “Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.” Mary, at the foot of the cross, was doing the same thing, taking in all that hate and violence against Jesus, not reacting in kind, but simply praying and believing that God would turn that negativity into something positive. That is what God did, in the resurrection.

The key to this teaching is that when we live this way, when we are holy as God is holy, when we act like God, we get to feel like God. Whoever we are, our dignity returns, our innocence returns and the joy and freedom of the Spirit fills us because

we are just like God.

One woman who had been sexually abused by a relative at the age of fourteen, was able to go on a healing journey and learned the truths that are taught in the readings today. She was able to confront her abuser with love, to share her feelings with him about what he had done to her 35 years earlier, without revenge or even calling him names. She even apologized to him for how she had treated him for all those years, and in the end, gave him a hug. Another person who heard her share her story at a pilgrimage remarked afterwards, "That's impossible." That is true. For us on our own, it is impossible. But with the power of the Holy Spirit within us and the teachings of Jesus to guide us, it is possible. This woman loved her enemy by forgiving him, and was set free to move on with her life. Such is the power of love, of compassion, of being holy as God is holy.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today makes present for us through Word and Sacrament that same love of enemies that Jesus lived on the Cross.

We who hear his Word and receive his Body and Blood are forgiven, healed and transformed into Temples of the Holy Spirit, holy as God is holy. We are then sent out to be a reflection of God's love to our wounded and unbelieving world.