

**Homily**  
**7th Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**February 23, 2020**

In today's first reading from Leviticus, we heard God direct Moses to tell the entire Israelite community to "Be holy, for I, the LORD, your God, am holy." By instructing the Israelites to bear no hatred, take no revenge nor bear any grudge against **"your people,"** but to "love your neighbor as yourself," God "raised the bar" for holiness when compared to the "eye for an eye" system of proportional justice first codified under Hammurabi, which itself was an improvement over the tribal feuds and vendettas which threatened the social fabric of early civilization. But notice that the Lord said "your people." Many Israelites took those words literally and, for the most part, applied the concept of "love of neighbor" only to their fellow Israelites. In some quarters, it was even considered a sacred duty to hate those outside of your community! Generally, the "eye for an eye" system of proportional justice prevailed in dealings with non-Israelites and continued among kingdoms and empires around the world. Unfortunately, we still see the concept of an "eye for an eye" in some parts of the Middle East to this day.

However, in today's Gospel, we hear Jesus replace that law of an "eye for an eye" with his "law of love;" that there should be no retaliation at all when he tells us:

- "Turn the other [cheek],"
- "Give to the one...who wants to borrow" and
- "should anyone press you into service for one mile, go for two miles."

Additionally, Jesus expands his "law of love" to include, not just Israelites or members of one's own community, but to ALL people with his words:

- "love your enemies" and
- "pray for those who persecute you."

Today's Gospel concludes with Jesus inviting his disciples, and us, to **"Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect."** Now he's set the bar REALLY high! But, this is what the Fathers of Vatican Council II referred to as our universal call to holiness: Our call "to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity."

But guess what? We're human; we sin. Holiness can seem to be elusive. An example from my life illustrates:

In 2011, after my first year of formation to the permanent diaconate,

Mary and I were driving to this very Cathedral to attend the ordination of the permanent deacon class ahead of me, when I was feeling insecure and uncertain about my calling to the diaconate. I told Mary: "I just don't feel holy." Mary responded with a not-very-encouraging "Don't worry; you're not!"

I will never forget her words because it reminds me of my life-long struggle to achieve holiness. But unlike the mythological Sisyphus who was doomed to an eternity of pushing a huge boulder up a steep hill only to have that boulder fall away before he reached the top of the hill, we have the Church and the sacraments to help us strive toward holiness.

This Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, is the beginning of Lent, a time for prayer, fasting and almsgiving, repentance and renewal so that we can be drawn more closely to Christ in his Paschal Mystery. I encourage you to take advantage of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Friday Stations of the Cross and the other sacramental offerings here at the Cathedral to enhance your Lenten experience so that we, "Temples of God," together, can all greet our risen Savior, in holiness, on Easter Sunday.