

Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 19, 2023

The concept of “justice” has evolved over the course of human history. “Reciprocal justice” summarized in the phrase “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” dates back to the 18th century BC in the Code of Hammurabi. Unfortunately, the world still sees such “tit-for-tat,” particularly in the Middle East. A few hundred years later, as we heard in the first reading from Leviticus, the Lord calls us to “not bear hatred for our brother or sister” and to “take no revenge and cherish no grudge.” God calls us to be holy, the foundation of which is to give of oneself to others.

In the Gospel, which is the fourth week in succession that we’ve heard from Jesus’ teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes even further. Rather than practice “eye for an eye” justice, Jesus demands that we “offer no resistance to...evil.” We’re told to “turn the other cheek” and “go the extra mile.” Not only that, Jesus tells us to “love our enemies and **pray** for those who persecute you.” This mandate expands the meaning of our call to holiness. Love is meant to break down barriers; we’re called to love, to pray for neighbors, and enemies, alike. We’re called not to hold back love on account of human judgment; rather, each of us is to strive for divine perfection, where friend and enemy are both treated with love.

That’s a tall order for us imperfect human beings, but I’d like to share an example of extending our love and our prayer, not only to our small circle of friends, not only to enemies of whom I pray we all have few, but to that vast middle—those who are unknown to us; and the impact that such love, such prayer, can have.

John is a casual runner; he runs simply to improve his cardiovascular fitness. One day, he finds himself running in an area that he’s not familiar with nor does he know anyone who lives in that neighborhood. He notices an ambulance in someone’s driveway and being the good guy that he is, wonders whether he should stop and offer to lend assistance. However, he’s not a medical professional, so he tells himself that there’s no material assistance that he could offer. Therefore, he just keeps on running and prays a “Hail Mary” for the well-being of that individual. He didn’t think anything more about it and on he ran.

The next week, he’s jogging around the same neighborhood and he hears a woman’s voice; she seemed to be calling after him, but since he didn’t know anyone in that neighborhood, he kept running. Finally, because of the woman’s persistence in calling after him, John stopped and turned around, asking “Me, you’re calling me?” “Yeah, you,” she said, “you saved my life.” John tells her that he’s not from this neighborhood and has never seen her before. She replied, “I recognize your face. Last week, I was rushed to the hospital in an ambulance. I was dying and knew that I was dying, but Jesus appeared to me. He held out his hand and your face was on the palm of his hand. Jesus told me, ‘You were going to die but because of the prayer of this man, you’re going to live.’” **[This is a true story; here’s the link to the 2-minute video: <https://youtu.be/utFFt0qiYtU>].**

That’s the power of one “Hail Mary;” the power of prayer.

So, whenever a friend asks you to pray for them, or when you hear the sirens of an emergency vehicle attending to the needs of a stranger, **(or since we have many medical professionals attending this 8:00PM Mass, when you pray for a patient)** do not dismiss the power that prayer, your prayer, can have. While the ultimate fate of that friend, that stranger or that patient is in God’s hands, know that your prayer—one way to express your “love of neighbor”—can have a positive impact on the lives of others; just as John experienced.