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7th SUNDAY C 2019.

Today's scripture continues the great Sermon of Jesus on the Plain, collecting together a series of sayings about human relations and the role of mercy and forgiveness.
(Luke 6:27-38)

The Hebrew scriptures provides a celebrated example of mercy of this kind, when the young David, an officer in King Saul's army, had a chance to kill his enemy, the King himself, but decides against it, and spares King Saul.
(I Samuel 26:2-23.)

The central reading, from the 1st Letter to the Corinthians, concerns the mystery of the resurrection. Last week Paul responded to those who doubt that resurrection is something we can all look forward to. There was some confusion among the early pagan converts, that perhaps only Jesus was to be raised up. By no means, said Paul: we are all destined in the same way to rise from death, just as Jesus rose. Just as we share the limitations and death of our first parents, so we bear the spiritual image of Christ within us, and shall rise with him, the second Adam.
(I Cor 15:45-49)

HOMILY "Dealing with the Enemy"

This sermon of Jesus is a hard passage to listen to, maybe at anytime in history, but for sure now. I can sum it up:
how it is a call to bless the enemy, not to curse.
A call to love, to do good, even for the sake of people you don't like, the ones you blame: your political enemies, your church enemies.
It's hard to know how to respond to this, especially as we count up the crimes of indifference toward the innocent: whether through abortion or mass shootings, hate crimes, the abuse of children, and separation of families at our southern border.

So, we face these things: and we hear a call not to curse. Let's look at it. I've been following some of the news reporting about the meeting Pope Francis called from among the world's bishops and cardinals, a four day session for the protection of children in the Church. It's a world-wide education in responsibility, accountability, transparency. The opinion among many in North America and Ireland especially, is that the pope could make the problem go away with the stroke of a pen, ("Hear this, Do this") but then years of denial and passivity are hard to awaken, in some parts of Africa, in India, in Italy too. Whatever is going to happen has to evolve "from the bottom up."

This is hard to be patient with.

At the meeting there have been survivors present, mostly in video, but also personally in the city. One played the violin for a prayer service.

Here are words everyone heard from one survivor at a prayer time:

"I feel like a beggar at the door of the castle. A beggar for truth, for justice, for light and all I get is silence and the smallest pieces of information, which I have to extract. I get tired and worn out, it's like they hide behind their walls, their dignity." That's what they heard.

Or this from the liturgy of the summit's first morning, February 21st:

"Nobody was listening to me; neither my parents, nor my friends, nor later the church authorities. They did not listen to me and my cry. And I ask myself: why? And I ask, why did God not listen to me?"

It's hard to imagine how this would not make a difference even to bishops who find themselves far removed. In Ghana, or south India.

And then at the final session of the summit there was an address by a Nigerian sister of the Holy Child Jesus:

Veronica Openibo. Picture this very black dedicated woman at the head table, where the pope also sat. The report notes that she went to the heart of the problem, the hierarchical clerical culture itself raising serious concern about formation practice, the specialness of seminarians in their isolation, and how this has created a culture of "mediocrity, hypocrisy, and complacency" that she said had brought the church to a "disgraceful and scandalous place."

And so the truth of our times and the message of this Gospel, well it all raises a lot of feelings. I look inside at my own emotional response, how easy it is to curse and not to bless, to blame a lot,

from an inner feeling of outrage.

Like you I carry the stories from all over, and the well worn disappointments at the hierarchical church. And I hear today:

“bless, do not curse; love, do good.”

The mystery of Jesus in the Gospel is that he encourages such a change of heart.

I wonder about how people change, how even a hardened heart, or a resistant spirit, can yield to something new.

The change that comes from below:

an invitation to something, some glimpse of possibility, something of sudden mercy, sudden spirit. How might this happen beyond the judgements and hatreds, the denials and self protection.

I'm helped remembering a story I read once, from Edwina Gately.

I think some of you know of her.

She is an English laywoman and a church worker.

We had her here to speak once, twenty years or so back.

She tells a story of being on mission once in Uganda

during the fascist reign of Idi Amin,

travelling with a priest by car to visit an outpost, one of their missions, and they were stopped by a military roadblock,

a half dozen or so soldiers heavily armed. Ordered out of the car.

She and the priest both feared the worst, abuse or rape, murder.

The soldier in charge lead her away from the car and across a field.

In a very simple way Edwina found herself aware what was happening and ready to die. And then, she says,

from this moment of crisis all she could think to do was to offer this man a cigarette. It was what she had. She did it.

She said that this offering shook the man deeply, as if finally his own tribal customs came to the surface, about giving and receiving,

and tore away the standards of violence and contempt he had been taught by the regime he served. He accepted the gift,

it was what his whole life told him to do;

and he wanted to give something back.

And he did, all he had, his gun. And she asked, “how does it work.”

And he showed her, and they walked back to the car.

There were words of greeting and farewell,

as she and her companion drove away.

What happened here? Something cut through the division, the fear.
Something changed right then, and the change marked everybody involved.
I doubt that the Ugandan militant was acquainted with the teaching of this Gospel,
but something deeper welled up from his own humanity.
Let's say he met life whole and up close, in the gift, and this real woman,
some kind of truth about who we are as people,
what do you want to do unto them,
what do you hope they might do or be for you.

I think this is what I need to hear from the scripture this evening:
I find I need mercy and grace for my own soul, as well as my enemy;
and I am actually called to bless others, to make a start
toward this generosity, to contemplate the bishops as well as the children,
the immigration officers, as well as the refugees.
This is not to analyze or explain or condemn or excuse
but to allow these people to enter our own confused hearts as human beings
to do unto them what you want them to do for you.

I think this teaching about blessing and love comes to this:
to see and allow for people to be whole persons,
with their own painful realities, limits, and hopes to belong and to matter.

A friend of mine has written about praying for people: which is
not to give God directions, but to hold people in contemplation as they are.
No need to explain, or to design their future.
Just let them be there, breathing and conscious. Their deep spiritual identity.
How they are marked with the image of Christ, as am I, as are we.
Whole Persons. From this, the writer says, "we learn to hold the whole of ourselves in
consciousness, our innate goodness as well as the persistent obstacles
that hinder us from embodying that goodness to the world."*

So here we are in this real world. Invited to bless, not to curse.
To allow and accept, not to deny.
It is new, to learn this contemplative attitude, this simplicity of beholding.
But it is the place from which change can arise. Might we try it?

Perhaps it's best not to start with bishops or ICE agents
but with your own spouse or children or friends, the ones who take you

often to the edge of patience and understanding.
And who deserve your blessing now.

I've heard a wise man say: it is hard to hate a person when you are close up.
So, the word is, "move in. Stay curious. Get out of your bunker."

*This quote and the idea of 'contemplative prayer' arise from the article "Praying for Others: A Contemplative Approach," by Jim Neafsey, in *Presence*, Vol 24 #3, p. 50.