

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time – A

1. Can I tell you a story about when I was growing up? I come from a farm community and, while we were not farmers, we had a good-sized piece of land and a huge garden. My mom did a lot of canning and so, the garden was an important part of the family economy.
2. My older brother and I were given the task of weeding the garden so that the vegetables planted there would have the sun and nourishment they needed. We weren't very good at it. It was hard work and sweaty. One summer we were particularly negligent at keeping the weeds at bay, and before you knew it, the weeds were as tall as we were. Since it was mid-summer by then and the ground was baked hard, pulling weeds became impossible. Mom was not happy. She insisted that we take care of the garden and give the green beans a chance. Not wanting to sweat the hard work, we decided to use the lawn mower to cut the weeds down to size. No luck. Some of the weeds were so large at that point and had such thick stems that they would not bend over. Plus it was hard to fit the lawn mower between the rows. It would have been great if it had worked, but unfortunately, the real solution had always been to pull the weeds when they first came up. Nothing else really measures up.
3. This whole section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is what reminded me of my failure as a gardener. You could read the various comparisons that Jesus makes as a commentary on how the new law replaces the old law, but especially in

Matthew's gospel, Jesus emphasizes that he has come to fulfill the law and the prophets, not to abolish them.

4. It might be better to think of the admonitions in today's Gospel as falling along those lines. The old Law still stands, but Jesus urges us to go deeper, and get at the root of those things which keep us from living fully in the kingdom.

The contrasts Jesus sets up between "you have heard it was said" and "but I say to you" seems to me to be designed to show us what it means to live in the kingdom of God. For one thing, it was not enough to study the Law, or to use it as a measure for external behavior. Jesus sharpens the Law, getting at the root of what it teaches, moving it into the realm of the internal dispositions from which evil actions proceed.

5. So, last week, we heard that if you want to avoid murder, then deal with your anger, because anger is at the root of murderous thoughts. If you want to avoid adultery, then deal with the lust you might be harboring. To avoid making false oaths, don't swear at all.

6. And today's reading continues the idea: Rather than retaliate, even in a measured fashion (an eye for an eye...) don't get involved in the process of revenge in the first place. Perhaps Jesus was noticing that the law of "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" was really hard to apply. It lends itself to alternative forms of interpretation as to whether the retaliation was really in the

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appropriate measure. More times than not, the violence will end up escalating all the same.

People who seek vengeance in the form of capital punishment, for example, rarely are at peace once the criminal has been put to death.

If a person is intent on living in the kingdom of God, the better response is to meet the violence with goodness. Only that has any prospect of bringing us into the realm of where God's values and God's way of dealing with things will hold sway.

7. The final comparison is a fitting capstone to this whole section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "act as God would act and you can be assured that your citizenship in God's kingdom is secure. How does God act? He showers down goodness on everyone, not just those who are closest to him. We are invited to take God's example as our lead.

8. Admittedly, this is a challenge. I fail at it more than I succeed. But one thing is clear: it does provide us with a direction in which to strive and grow. As difficult as it might be to love one's enemies, at least there's no ambiguity in what Jesus is saying to us. We don't have to guess. And, at the same time, we can't really get away with rationalizations that would support any other action.

One of our friars has a bumper sticker on his car that's quite humorous, but still makes the point: It reads, "When Jesus said 'Love your enemies', he probably

meant 'Don't kill them.'"

9. When we look at the state of the world, and maybe even at our own relationships, it's easy to see how far we are from perfectly following Jesus' teaching. Violence and war and retaliation run rampant, even among professed Christians. Surveys show that Catholics support capital punishment to about the same extent as the general population. We somehow have not heard this part of the Gospel.

10. But it is also true that sometimes we see an inkling of how much following Jesus on this point would change the world. A few years ago, there was a mass killing in an Amish grade school. Several children were shot to death. They caught the man who did it.

11. The response of the Amish community was amazing. Not only did they not want the man to be put to death, they also were concerned for his family and reached out to them, understanding that they were also victims of what happened. I'll never forget that. It spoke so clearly to me that such a way of living is really what Jesus had in mind.

12. How did they get to the point of doing that? And having that be their natural and first response? They must have been tending their spiritual garden all along, and rooting out the weeds when they first appeared, in whatever form they showed themselves, rather than waiting until things go so bad that you couldn't even get through them with a lawnmower.

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13. To live in the kingdom of God means to operate under the principles that God uses in dealing with humanity. To draw the lines of love where God draws them. We will never love our enemies in the same way as we love those dearest to us. Love is different from affection. But God desires the good for everyone. We are charged with doing the same.