“Love Your Enemies” - Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sunday, Feb. 19, 2107

LV 19:1-2, 17-18; PS 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13; 1 COR 3:16-23; MT 5:38-48

People in the United States are living through extraordinarily challenging and divisive times. The weeks since the inauguration of Donald J. Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States have been marked by public protests on a scale rarely seen in this country. Over 3.3 million people participated in the “Women’s Marches” of January 21st. Tens of thousands of people turned up at airports across the country to voice their disapproval of the executive order signed by President Trump on January 27 banning Syrian refugees and all citizens from some Muslim-majority countries from entering the US. Given the pace of executive action thus far I can only imagine that there will be several more controversies between the writing of this reflection (in the waning days of January) and our celebration of the Seventh Sunday in Ordinary time, but rather than attempt to predict the future I will focus upon President Trump’s executive order on immigration, and the divisive political climate in the United States as two signs of the times that we should consider alongside our hearing of this Sunday’s readings.

In the first reading we are reminded about the importance of both charity and fraternal correction: “You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart. Though you may have to reprove your fellow citizen, do not incur sin because of him” (Lv 19:17). The moral theologian Paul Wadell has written on how we all need good friends – especially our friends who are also brothers and sisters in Christ – if we are to grow in virtue and goodness. Good friendships are morally beneficial in many ways, but undoubtedly one of the most important ways that good friends help us to become better people is through their willingness to be honest with us and correct us when we are being foolish. Wadell writes, “if a friend really does want what is best for me and truly is committed to my good, she must tell me the truth, especially when the truth I refuse to see is hurting others as well as me. She must care enough about me to point out attitudes or behavior that turn me away from the good” (Happiness & The Christian Moral Life, 72). Elsewhere, Wadell tells us that the church should function as a community of friends in this way – in our efforts to be good and to support one another in doing what is right we should act as good friends would act toward our fellow Christians (Becoming Friends).

Over the last year and even more in the last few weeks, many of us may have realized that some of our friends are deviating very significantly from the good. It would be easy to simply ignore or “unfriend” those people, but these readings call us instead to engagement.

These policy changes should be of grave concern to all Christians. As James Martin, S.J. has made clear in a recent video posted at America magazine’s website, the moral imperative to offer hospitality to the stranger is grounded deeply in scripture and in Catholic Social Teaching. The President and Vice President of the USCCB
issued a joint statement stating that “Welcoming the stranger and those in flight is not one option among many in the Christian life. It is the very form of Christianity itself.”

We must be humble regarding our own grasp of rightness, and there must be room to disagree about some specifics of policy, but there should be no room for xenophobia, or racism. When our brothers and sisters are failing utterly to uphold the dignity of all or to show the mercy and hospitality that God demands of us, charity and our own obligations to the truth demand that we speak up. We do so out of love for them and because of our own duty to uphold justice. When a policy puts vulnerable, innocent people at grave risk, we must act to oppose it.

This week’s Gospel passage is one of the most challenging in all of scripture. Jesus tells his disciples that it’s not enough for them to love those who love them back; they must love even their enemies. This reading reminds us of the boundlessness of God’s love and the ways in which human notions of justice (“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”) are upended by that Divine love.

A phrase from this Gospel that might give us pause is often translated “offer no resistance to one who is evil” (Mt 5:39). What does this mean? Does it undermine the importance of political engagement and fraternal correction? What would it look like to be faithful to this passage in our world today?

Christian pacifists are among those who adhere to the strictest interpretation of this Gospel, maintaining that this command from Christ forbids any use of violence whatsoever – even violence used to resist evil. It is important to note, however, that even Christian pacifists do not interpret this passage to mean that evil must not be resisted. Rather, it speaks only to how evil must be resisted – with active non-violence. The command to “turn the other cheek” points to the need for disciples of Christ to assert their dignity and be willing to endure suffering rather than inflict it.

The importance of being willing to suffer ourselves rather than subject others to violence is quite pertinent as we consider President Trump’s refugee and immigration policies. Some people, such as San Diego’s Bishop Robert McElroy, have claimed that this policy is rooted in xenophobia and religious prejudice. To be honest, I would agree. However, even if we take a more generous interpretation of the basis for the policy – e.g., it is designed to keep Americans safe by keeping terrorists off US soil – the policy remains problematic for Christians. In effect, such a policy puts thousands of innocent refugees at risk in return for an apparent reduced risk for ourselves. People who are called to love even their enemies must do better.

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