

After his inspiring homily based on today's readings, the pastor asked his congregation, "How many of you have forgiven your enemies"? About half held up their hands. He then repeated his question. This time about 80 percent held up their hands. He then repeated his question again. All hands went up, except one small elderly lady. "Mrs. Jones?" inquired the pastor, are you not willing to forgive your enemies? "I don't have any." she replied, smiling sweetly. "Mrs. Jones, That is very unusual. How old are you?" "Ninety-three," she replied. "Oh Mrs. Jones, what a blessing and a model to us all you are that you have no enemies, not a single one, even at your age of 93. Could you tell us how you lived so long and don't have a single enemy in the world? The little sweet lady faced the congregation, and said "They are all dead."

Main theme of this Sunday's reading is forgiving your enemies even before they are dead. And forgiving others is one of the ways to become holy. The first and second readings give us reasons why we should be holy, and the Gospel describes four methods of becoming holy people prescribed for us by Jesus.

The first reading, taken from the book of Leviticus, gives the holiness code: "*Be holy, for I the Lord, your God, am holy.*" It also gives us the way to share God's holiness: "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*"

In the Gospel passages taken from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus confirms, corrects, and expands the Ten Commandments. Here, Jesus condemns even the mild form of the "Law of the Talion, (*Lex Talionis*)," the Babylonian tribal law of restricted retaliation which Moses passed on to Israel.

During their captivity in Egypt, the Jews became familiar with the crude tribal law of retaliation (*Lex Talionis* = Tit-for-Tat), given by the ancient lawmaker Hammurabi during the period 2285-2242 BC. When this law was first developed, it made life better and more civilized. Its restricted revenge made it commensurate with the offense. Moses instructed the Israelites to follow tit-for-tat retaliation, rather than to wreak total destruction upon their enemies. That is, instead of mutilating or murdering all the members of the offender's family or tribe, they should discover the offender and only punish him/her with an equal mutilation or harm. Later, a milder version of this law was substituted. It demanded monetary compensation, as decided by a judge, in place of physical punishment.

In its place, Jesus gives his new law of love, grace, forgiveness, reconciliation and no retaliation. For Jesus, retaliation, or even limited vengeance, has no place in the Christian life

The second part of today's Gospel passage is the central part of the Sermon on the Mount. It presents the Christian ethic of personal relationships: love one's neighbors and forgive one's enemies. It tells us that what makes Christians different is the grace with which they treat others with loving kindness and mercy, even if they don't deserve it. We are commanded to love our enemies as Jesus loves us, with *agápe* love, not because our enemies deserve our love, but because Jesus loves them so much that he died for them as He did for us.

In today's gospel we have the hardest of Jesus' teachings! Among other things, he tells us very candidly: 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'.

In a world of hatred, revenge, pride and selfishness, we wonder how such a teaching of Jesus can be lived! Today's society is rather busy perpetrating hatred, enmity, division, violence and selfishness, even as nations are desperately making sophisticated and ultra-power nuclear and chemical weapons, all in the name of establishing world peace and security. We are allowed legally to own guns all in the name of security and self-defense. Defenseless unborn babies are killed all in the name of pro-choice. Why only mothers have the rights to choose and not the babies. Even unborn babies would have loved to choose to be born.

President Trump is visiting India on Feb.24th. A 3-layer security is provided by Indian government with more than 25 thousand police officers and spending 100s of thousands million Indian Rupees. If everyone followed today's Gospel teaching there would be no need of any protection for anyone. One could just move about freely, because there would be no enemies.

So, though it is difficult, let's try to practice this teaching of Jesus by loving our enemies which will pave our path to holiness.