

Dear Friends,

Our Gospel for this seventh Sunday of the year continues that section of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus takes the Law beyond the boundaries of the official interpretation, beyond its letter. In the second half we hear: “You have heard it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes the sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust.’”

(Matthew 5:38-48)

Contrary to what a person might think, there is no Old Testament commandment calling for the hating of one’s enemies. Nor does it appear in the New Testament. The notion of “enemy” was an assumption by the scribes and Pharisees, who defined an enemy as anyone who was not a Jew, and to love someone meant to love one’s countryman. Jesus challenges the idea of only loving someone of the same country of origin and hating all others. God’s love unites all people, on whom the Father’s sun rises and the rain falls. However warranted retribution might seem, Jesus calls his followers to seek reconciliation above and beyond revenge.

Despite any violence done to us, regardless of the injustice we may suffer, Jesus asks us as his followers to take the first and often difficult step to forgive. Because we are Jesus’ disciples our first concern is always to be the work of reconciliation, undoing the walls that divide us, building instead bridges that unite.

As difficult, too, that it may be to love a particular group of people or even “enemies of the state,” the real challenge for the majority of us is to love the people we live with, work with, worship with and go to school with; to love the people with whom we struggle, the people who annoy us or whom we annoy.

“To love our enemies” is to create and preserve an atmosphere where reconciliation is always possible and sought out whenever needed. Jesus’ challenge is to see beyond differences, stereotypes and appearances and recognize and respect the inherent goodness of every person as created in God’s image.

Peace and blessings,

Father John