

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This week, we begin Lent. Last week (if you read my article), you know about “Giving it up for Lent.” This week, I want to remind each of us (myself included) that Lent is about growing in relationship with Jesus, which means being holy – becoming like Christ. The readings today are a challenge to become holy. They call us out of our complacency and into greatness. And boy, is it **HARD!**

The first reading, from the book of Leviticus, has the LORD saying, “**Be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy**” (Leviticus 19:2). Remember, God truly calls us – you and me – to *holiness*. This is not just for the priests and religious, this is not just for the “Church-Ladies;” this is for each baptized Christian! This call, while impossible to live out on our own, God graces with His own power. If God commands it (“Be holy!”), then He gives the ability. The question is: Will we stir up the grace? Will we allow God to use us? I heard recently that Rev. Billy Graham was praised for his incredible patience. He responded, “I don’t have any more patience than anyone else... I just use mine.” Will we take the time to stir up the graces God has *already placed within us* by Baptism?

So what does this look like on a practical level? The readings today look specifically at how we love (or don’t love) those around us.

You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart.... Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against any of your people. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

(Leviticus 19:17-18)

Ugh! Not hating the people around us. This includes those we work with, in our neighborhood, or our families who are constantly backbiting us, annoying us, or a general nuisance. This includes those who have hurt us – intentionally or unintentionally. God is saying to us that we are to work past our hurts, submitting them to Him for healing, so that we may see His image and likeness in each person. No revenge. No retaliation. No gossip! Ugh!

The second reading and the Gospel expand this understanding of who and how we are to love. In the second reading, St. Paul says,

Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person; for the temple of God, which you are, is holy. (I Corinthians 3:16-17)

St. Paul exhorts us to remember that we are temples of God – that God dwells within us. He also says that that makes us – you and me – holy. Whoa! I would guess that most of the time, you’re not going around your daily duties thinking about how holy you are. Yet, this is what God tells us through His sacred word. This means that we must love and honor ourselves. Sometimes it is so much easier to deal patiently with the people around us, to put up with their fault and failings, than to deal patiently with ourselves. I have found for myself that my expectation is higher for myself so when I fail to meet it, if I am not careful, I can fall into self-recrimination. Yet God is telling us to love ourselves, to be merciful to ourselves. We called not to hate ourselves, but to love ourselves. Self-hatred is an offense against the Lord – Whose Temple we are! This doesn’t mean, of course, that we pamper ourselves. It does mean, however, that we *must* forgive ourselves, and recognize the dignity we have, even in the midst of our weaknesses, failures and brokenness.

Finally, in the Gospel, Jesus says to us,

I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father. (Matthew 5:44-45)

Not only are we called to love our neighbors – those who are close to us, family, peers, etc., God calls us to *love our enemies!* This is exceptionally difficult in our society that has separated the world into “Us and Them.” We see it so strongly in our political realm today. Who in Washington (whether Republican or Democrat) goes against everything you believe in? Who do you consider an enemy to everything you think is right and good? That person, Jesus *commands*, is the person we are to *love*. I said it before and I’ll say it again: Ugh!

This is what holiness means – to be like God. God calls, commands us to love those around us, ourselves, and even our enemies. But remember, if God commands this He *is* giving us the grace to do it. Will we ask for that grace? Will we accept it? Will we exercise the grace to be holy and to love? As we move into Lent, I invite you to ponder this and how God is calling you to forgive and to love.