

Do you matter? In the overall scheme of themes, do you make a difference? To what, or to whom, do you matter and make a difference?

All of us have our own little corner of the world in which, as the Bible expresses it, we live and move and have our being. Do your actions make an appreciable difference? Do you matter?

Think about that, while also thinking about the seemingly impossible, unreasonable, and unattainable standards that Jesus sets for us and all of his followers.

Aren't his instructions that we just read about in today's gospel lesson impossible, unreasonable, and unattainable for mere mortals like us? Isn't the sort of behavior that Jesus expects of us actually the level of perfection that we expect from God?

This is what one person said: "Sometimes I say to God: 'You know what's wrong with you, God?'"

And God asks, "What?"

And the person answers, "God, you love too indiscriminately. You trust people way too much. You are far too forgiving. And you are entirely too patient."

The person invited God to tell them what is wrong with them.

But all they heard God say in reply was, "I really don't remember."

Which only proves that person's point, doesn't it?

Fortunately for us, that is how God acts. Those are God's high and forgiving standards. Now, brace yourself and recall again what Jesus said our standards for action are supposed to be.

Jesus said that we are expected to love our enemies, and to do good to those who hate us, and to bless those who curse us, and to pray for those people who abuse us. He says that we are to turn the other cheek when assaulted, and to let the person who steals from us keep what they have taken. We are expected to lend to others and expect nothing in return. Jesus says do not judge others; do not condemn others for their actions. Instead, we are to forgive them. And then Jesus sums up this seemingly impossible, unreasonable, and unattainable list of expectations by telling us to do to other people as we would have them do to us. We are to treat others as we wish to be treated by them. The Golden Rule.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus is calling us to a way of life that reaches beyond our worldly understanding and normal behavior. The risk here is that these expectations are so excessive and so beyond our ability to fulfill that we fail to take them seriously, and instead think of them as just Jesus being Jesus. The temptation is to say, "Get serious, Jesus. I cannot meet such a high standard."

It is logical that we would think all that loving, blessing, praying, turning the other cheek, and forgiving is impossible. Surely Jesus is thinking about God's standards, God's ways. They cannot possibly be mine. And yet, we also know don't we, deep down inside ourselves, we know that despite our frailties these sorts of seemingly superhuman ways of behaving is exactly what Jesus expects of Christians. As a result, we spend our lives at least trying to be even a little better at loving, and blessing, and praying, and turning the other cheek, and forgiving, then we were the day before. We take baby steps. Being a devout Christian means living a life of endless baby steps always trying to move a little closer to achieving the ideal that Jesus has set before us.

At the heart of Christ's expectations for us is our willingness to forgive others, which requires us also to be willing to forgive ourselves. Full disclosure: I am much better talking about forgiveness than I am at forgiving. This is one of those times when it is awkward being the preacher. I never want to imply that I have mastered forgiveness and therefore so should you. In fact, just the opposite: I often struggle greatly to forgive others and to forgive myself. What about you?

I suppose one of the reasons we say thousands of times in our lives those words from the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," is precisely because forgiving seems impossible at times. Yet because forgiveness is an invitation to start over again, we are saved by forgiveness. It's been said that "Life is an adventure in forgiveness."

The very idea of forgiveness presupposes that we are free and morally responsible individuals who are capable of change. Forgiveness is not just one idea among many. It is preeminent because it shows us that we are no longer prisoners of our past who are condemned endlessly to repeat the unfortunate circumstances of that past. Forgiveness is the undoing of what has been done. When we forgive, it demonstrates that we in turn are worthy of being forgiven. There is good reason to believe that before we can forgive other people their trespasses, we have to believe that we are worthy of being forgiven our own trespasses.

Helping ourselves believe that we are worthy of forgiveness has been compared to refinishing an old chair. The first thing people do when restoring old chairs is strip them down to the bare wood. They do this to see what the wood looked like originally, and to determine if the chair is worth all the effort of refinishing it. The first step is strip away all the years of grime, the garish coats of paint piled one on top of the other, all the junk that has been added to the chair's finish over the years, to find the solid, simple, unadorned wood that is underneath.

At times we can be like an old chair that needs to have years and years of experience and hurt and anger and cynicism and disappointment and frustration stripped away so that our original unblemished selves are revealed again. Every now and again we need to take a hard look at the excess emotional baggage that all of us, to some extent, lug around. Taking that hard inward look is a spiritual act of personal forgiveness. God forgives us so that we can forgive others, including ourselves.

Sometimes it is hard work letting God forgive us. Sometimes we need to meet another person – a Christian saint – who already is securely grounded in their faith and relationship with God before we can relax our natural inclination to resist God’s willingness to forgive us. Someone once defined a Christian as someone who has met a Christian saint. There are Christian saints all around us. I’ve met some in my life. In every parish I’ve ever been affiliated with, including this one, I have encountered some Christian saints, people who by demonstrating what it means to be mature and grounded in their faith, patient and loving, become models for the rest of us. Such people are reminders that we matter; our actions matter.

A man was walking along a deserted beach at sunset, when he noticed a woman in the distance. As he grew nearer, he noticed that the woman kept leaning down, picking something up, and throwing it out into the water. Time and again, she kept hurling things out into the ocean. As the man got closer, he noticed that the woman was picking up starfish that had washed up on the beach and, one at a time, she was throwing them back into the water. The man was puzzled. As he approached the woman he said, “Good evening, I was wondering what you are doing.” The woman replied, “I’m throwing these starfish back into the ocean. You see, it’s low tide right now and all these starfish have been washed up on the shore. If I don’t throw them back into the sea, they will die from lack of oxygen.” The man said, “I understand they will die, but there must be thousands of starfish on the beach. You cannot possibly get to all of them. There are simply too many. And don’t you realize, this is probably happening on hundreds of beaches all up and down this coast. Can’t you see that you cannot possibly make any real difference?” The woman smiled, bent down, and picked up yet another starfish. As she threw it back into the sea, she said, “Made a difference to that one.”

Do you matter? Do your actions make a difference? Despite any difficulties you might have fulfilling Christ’s seemingly impossible, unreasonable and unattainable expectations that we be loving, blessing, praying, turning the other cheek, and forgiving people, your actions make a difference? You matter. We all do. I think that God is counting on us to understand that, and to live our lives accordingly. Amen.

**Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany**

**20 February 2022**

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