

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle A, 2011
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In Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, one of the brothers named Ivan, imagines a scene in which Christ returns to earth in the mid-17th century, in the middle of the Inquisition. Christ, in his story returns to earth, not in the glory of the second coming, but he returns for a sneak peak, if you will, to see how we are managing our affairs. Fifteen hundred years after his resurrection Christ comes back to check-in on us. He returns to Seville, in Spain, the day after 100 hundred people had been burned alive by the Grand Inquisitor for the sin of heresy. Christ returns in all his humility and meekness, as if he had stepped from the very pages of the Gospels. He heals a blind man, raises a dead girl, and blesses all who are present in the city square. All immediately recognize him as Christ, returned.

The Grand Inquisitor recognizes him as well and, surprisingly, throws him in jail for heresy. Eventually the Grand Inquisitor goes to the jail cell to interview the returned Christ. It's not really an interview; Christ never speaks. But the Grand Inquisitor gives a series of speeches in which he criticizes the returned Christ. He says:

I swear, man is created weaker and baser than you thought him! How, how can he ever accomplish the same things as you? Respecting him so much, you behaved as if you had ceased to be compassionate, because you demanded too much of him—and who did this? He who loved him more than himself! Respecting him less, you would have demanded less of him, and that would be closer to love, for his burden would be lighter.

Christ has no answer for this critique. He stands silently in the jail cell and lets the Grand Inquisitor accuse him of loving us less than he could have. If Christ had really loved us, he would have given us something more valuable than our freedom to live as Christ lived. He would have given us, through a miracle, happiness, not freedom.

The words from today's gospel are some of the very words that the Grand Inquisitor has in mind:

love your enemy,
turn the other cheek,
give away your cloak and your shirt,
walk the extra mile
be perfect as God is perfect.

These are tough sayings of Christ. Given the state of affairs over the past two-thousand years, it would seem that we human beings are incapable of carrying out these tough commands of Christ. We are weaker than Christ thought us to be. The

Grand Inquisitor seems to have a point. Who can love an enemy, who can love those who hate?

One solution in interpreting these saying of Jesus is to think that he was only speaking to an exclusive group of special disciples. He was addressing, perhaps, his core constituency, not the average follower. Some scholars surmise that this is the beginnings of religious orders of monks and nuns. The thinking goes like this, only someone protected from the real world could actually live out these tough saying of Jesus and so started religious life. Jesus really meant these sayings for people who would eventually cloister themselves away and never really come into contact with people who hate. Or if they did come into contact with their enemies they would be able to love them in some extraordinary, Mother-Theresa-type-love. These commands are for the heroic in virtue like Mother Theresa or the Dalai Lama.

But this, in fact, is not an accurate interpretation of these tough sayings of Jesus. If we look closely at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has been addressing, not just his closest disciples, but a large group of followers, followers that are never named. The anonymous and faithful followers. People like us. Like you and I.

So if these tough sayings are meant for all of us, and if we don't want to fall in with the Grand Inquisitor who accuses Jesus of not loving us enough, then what are we to do? How are we to interpret these commands from Jesus to love our enemy. Are we in fact meant to carry them out and are we strong enough to do it?

Some have interpreted the love your enemy command as the foundation for Christian Pacifism. But many scripture scholars find this to be illogical. For if we truly loved our enemy then there would be little foundation for our legal system. We might as well abolish all forms of judicial oversight. There is evil in the world and we are to oppose that evil in all its forms. Loving the evil does not seem to make sense when compared with Jesus actions in other parts of the gospel. Remember, he calls the scribes and Pharisees a brood of vipers; he overturns the money changers' tables in the temple. If we are to interpret this passage correctly, then it must make sense when compared to the rest of Jesus' actions and sayings.

IF these few tough sayings are meant for us, the typical faithful follower of Jesus, then what are we to do with them?

Many scripture scholars say that these passages are not meant to be interpreted in a public level. In other words, Jesus is not giving commands about how to run a country or a nation. These are commands for the personal, interpersonal level. These commands are to be lived out within our homes, schools, communities, and workplaces. But this still does not make them any easier. And I don't know if my goal is to make them any easier for us. I think Jesus is telling us: Yes we can.

Unlike the Grand Inquisitor, we are not to despair when thinking about the power and spirit of the human being. For that is the sin of the Grand Inquisitor; he has

given up on human beings and more importantly he has given up on the Spirit of Jesus that he left with us as a guide and strength. Yes we can turn the other cheek when we are persecuted. Yes we can love our enemy. It's within our human capacity when helped by the Spirit of Jesus, to love all peoples, even people who do us harm and evil.

We are not weaklings and we should not give up on ourselves so easily. We should hold ourselves to this standard that Jesus sets out for us in today's gospel.

Of course there is an eschatological dimension to all of what Jesus says. In other words, we are not yet fully able to love our enemies, but in the full coming of Jesus' kingdom for which we wait in hope and faith, we will be able to fulfill all of Jesus' commands. The time has not yet come in its fullest, there is more to come.

Something better awaits us. We are not to become like the Grand Inquisitor who has given up on waiting for better times and the full reign of God. God is coming in strength and power and in those times we will be perfect like God is perfect. There is a future dimension to all that Jesus says in today's gospel. In a sense, Jesus is saying to us today, don't lose hope. Have faith that Jesus can give us the strength and the power and the glory to be able to actually love an enemy. Of course we should not love the evil, but loving the evil-doer is within our capacity as human beings.

Today Jesus has told us what we are capable of. We are capable of loving like God loves because we are made in the very same love of God.

Today's gospel is about the virtues we are to nourish through communion with God and with one another. We are to hold tightly to the virtues of faith, of hope, and of love above all else. You and I are capable of holding on to these virtues and practicing them in our homes and our work places. No we won't do it perfectly because we are sinners, but don't lose sight of the power we hold within ourselves.

We don't need to become monks in a cloister in order to practice these virtues that Jesus holds up for us today.

We don't need our nation to start practicing these virtues before we ourselves lead the way in loving our enemy.

We simply need to trust in what Jesus tells us about our very human ability to love one another as he has loved us.