

7th Sunday per Annum - A
Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18;
I Corinthians 3:16-23;
Matthew 5:38-48
Little Flower - 2/19/17

My Brothers and Sisters,

In today's reading from Leviticus, God told Moses to tell the whole Israelite community: "*Be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy.*" This is the vocation of every human person. Therefore, it is important that we reflect on what it means to be holy.

The first place to look for the meaning of holiness is Jesus' words in the Gospels. Jesus offers two interpretations of this verse. In today's Gospel, Jesus concludes today's Gospel by telling his listeners, "*So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" In Luke's Gospel, Jesus told his listeners, "*Be merciful, just as (also) your Father is merciful*" [6:36]. In the Gospels, then, to be holy is to be perfect and to be merciful. Pope Francis frequently reminds us that mercy, which includes forgiveness and compassion, is the quality most proper to God.¹ We are holy to the extent that we are forgiving and compassionate.

Many years ago, Fr. Josef Goldbrunner wrote a small book entitled *Holiness Is Wholeness*. The word *holy* and the word *whole* have the same root. Scripture scholar Fr. John L. McKenzie argues that the word "'perfect' represents the Hebrew word for 'whole' or 'integral.'"² It is important to understand that holiness is not psychological wholeness or emotional health. If it were, St. Therese would not be the great saint she is. Rather, holiness as wholeness has to do with right relationships with God, others, the world, and ourselves.

One of our principal challenges to holiness is the challenge both to keep these four relationships in balance and to prioritize them. For example, many busy people say that they just cannot find time for prayer or worship. As we get older and our world expands, our challenge is to balance and prioritize our relationships with others. I find teenagers particularly challenged in this area, for example, spending time with family versus spending time with friends. We often read that many people do not practice healthy self-care. When any of our relationships are not in balance, all of them are not in balance.

I often quote Matthew Kelly's phrase the-best-version-of-ourselves. In *The Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic*, Matthew Kelly tells us why he chose this phrase. When he first started speaking about holiness, he said that people's eyes would glaze over when he used the words *holy* and *holiness*. These words did not speak to people. As he reflected on the meaning of holiness, he came to understand that the call to holiness is a call to become the-best-version-of-ourselves.³ Why? As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, we are the temple of God, and the Spirit of God dwells within us! The more Christ-like we become, the more whole or holy we become.

Today's first reading addresses what it means to have a right relationship with others. Christians sometimes mistakenly think that Jesus' second great commandment, "*Love your neighbor as yourself,*" was new with Jesus. Jesus' second great commandment, as we heard in today's first reading, comes from the book of Leviticus. The newness of Jesus' two great commandments was that he made love of God and love of neighbor inseparable. Also, I would argue that many of our failures to love others stem from loving our neighbors as ourselves, which is often not very much. A starting point for loving others is loving ourselves.

In today's Gospel, Jesus raises the standard as he did in last Sunday's Gospel. It is not enough that we love people who are like us or even people who are very different from us. He challenges us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us because God loves all his sons and daughters. If we do not love them, how are we different from tax collectors and pagans who love those who love them and greet those who greet them? Finally, in John's Gospel, Jesus gave us the gold standard for loving others: "*This is my commandment: love one another as I love you*" [15:12]. Jesus made his love for us the standard for our love for others.

My brothers and sisters, if we want to be holy, we must be forgiving and compassionate, live in a right relationship with God, others, the world, and ourselves, and strive to become the-best-version-of-ourselves.

- ¹ Pope Francis, “30. Merciful like the Father (cf Lk 6:36-38),” General Audience, St. Peter’s Square, Wednesday, 21 September 2016.
- ² John L. McKenzie, “The Gospel according to Matthew,” *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. by Raymond Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ : Prentice Hall, 1968). Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996. 5:48.
- ³ Matthew Kelly, *The Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic: How Engaging 1% of Catholics Could Change the World*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Publishing, 2012), p. 78.