

7th Sunday per Annum - A
Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18;
I Corinthians 3:16-23;
Matthew 5:38-48
Little Flower - 2/23/20

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.

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. 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. To use a colloquial phrase, I would suggest that this means doing right by each of them.

However, one of our principal challenges to holiness is the challenge 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.

Both in Matthew's and Luke's Gospel, we find parallels to this verse. In today's Gospel, Jesus concludes by telling his listeners, "*So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" Scripture scholar Fr. Aelred Cody suggested that being perfect is "having all the attributes that something or someone is supposed to have, or being everything that something or someone is supposed to be." In this context, it suggests that we are like God when we love those who do not like us or who do not treat us well.

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 giving, is the quality most proper to God. We are holy to the extent that we are forgiving and giving.

However, the 1970 translation of the Jerusalem Bible translated this verse as "*Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.*" Compassion is more than simply giving. To be compassionate is to be sensitive and responsive to the real needs of others, both those expressed and those that remain unexpressed. Through attentiveness, openness, and gentleness, we attune ourselves to others and to their needs. We then respond in the most personally appropriate way we can.

Most of us probably think that we are more capable of mercy or compassion than we are of perfection. However, in the Old Testament, mercy is attributed to God while perfection is a goal to be sought by all of us.

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. 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. However, becoming holy, becoming perfect, becoming merciful, becoming forgiving, and becoming compassionate are processes. In other words, each day we have to strive to become a-better-version-of-ourselves.

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.