

## Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time

Year C

I Sam 26:2,7-9,12-13,22-23

Psalm 103:1-4,8,10,12-13

I Cor 15:45-49

Luke 6:17, 27-38

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A few years back, on a warm Sunday in August, I found myself sitting in my sister's backyard following a family barbecue. (It's good to think of such things on a day like this, and be reminded that the fine weather will come again.) The rest of the family had gone, leaving me, my sister and her husband, and a young couple from next door. During a pause in the conversation, my three-year-old nephew, Matthew, who was sitting on my lap, slowly leaned over to the neighbor - who was very pretty and, let us say, dressed for summer - looked up into her face, and said in the voice of a twenty-year-old, "You have the prettiest blue eyes." Well, we all laughed, and the young woman said, "Well, thank you, Matthew! But my eyes aren't blue. They're green." And without missing a beat, and in the same adult voice, Matthew replied, "Green is my faaavorite color!"

Now, I know children these days start lots of things early, but three-years-old seemed a bit young to be flattering a girl like a college fraternity boy. I looked down at him in shock, and asked my sister, "Who taught him to talk like that?" Still laughing, my sister said, "Nobody taught him. He's a boy. He was born knowing how to flirt."

Of course, my sister was right. Human instinct draws boys and girl together. To use a computer analogy, we are "hard-wired" to be attracted to each other. And as the Bible tells us, that is the way God intends it to be. It's part of His plan for us.

We know that we are also hard-wired for other behaviors as well. We instinctively try to preserve our lives, we explore our surroundings, we use language, we make music, we imagine. Parents and teachers train us in the best ways to do these things, but they don't give us the desire. We are born wanting to know, wanting to laugh, wanting to hear and to make beautiful sounds and wonderful words, wanting to find out what things were like in the past and how matters stand far away.

All these instincts and desires are good. They come from God. They are a large part of what makes life such a gift, learning such a good, loving such a glory. But God calls us to more. God calls us to enjoy being alive, but not above all things. God calls us to marvel at the wonder of the skies and the earth, but not above all things. God call us to cherish eyes green or blue or brown, to relish the pleasures of friendship and romance and marriage, but not above all things. The full humanity of following Christ means more.

The first reading reminds us of this. King Saul is intent on killing David. One night, David and Abishai sneak into the camp, and find Saul asleep. Look at this through David's eyes. He sees before him his defenseless, mortal enemy, and he hears Abishai whispering, "Now is your chance. If the situation were reversed, Saul would not hesitate to kill you. So give me the word, and this threat to your life will come to an end." Who could blame David for giving the order to kill? Would it not be an act of self-defense? Isn't it the natural thing to do, to kill an enemy when the

chance arises, to kill someone who has raised an army and chased you into the desert, who has set his heart and mind on your destruction?

David does not do the natural thing. Like all of us, he is hard-wired for survival; yet he refuses to harm the man who wants to harm him. Every instinct in David must have cried out to put an end to his misery, his constant flight, his daily fear that tomorrow, finally, Saul would catch up with him. But he does not obey those instincts. He puts his trust in something beyond himself. "The LORD will reward each man for his justice and faithfulness." David respects God's will, and shows Saul mercy.

David is not born merciful. Granting mercy is not a valuable instinct if your first priority is self-preservation. Showing mercy to a helpless enemy is something we do only with the grace of God.

Jesus speaks to all of us who often find ourselves in the same situation as David. God has made sleep pleasurable, nature beautiful, friendship indispensable - but there are other things to which we must attend. God has made marriage holy, food delicious, and music a delight, and Christ says yes, these are all good, but there is more. And that more is hard. We are hard-wired for sleep, not mercy. Our instinct is for pleasure, not pain. Our nature moves us to satisfaction, not self-denial.

Jesus knows this. No one has to teach Jesus about the ways of the human heart. He knows that our hard-wiring moves us to save ourselves, to seek pleasure, to shun pain. These are good instincts, but Jesus wants more for us. If our chief concerns are self-protection and pleasure, we will love only those who love us, do good only to those who do good to us, lend only to those who can repay us. That will be the sensible, satisfying way to behave. But Jesus wants us to act with a new priority, a different logic, a better way of looking at the world. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you and pray for those who persecute you. Do not condemn, but forgive."

And, no doubt, Christ's disciples had all the questions we have when we hear these words. How can I lend to those who can't repay? I'll go broke! How can I treat my enemies with love? They'll take advantage of me! How can I bless the person who hits me? It's against human nature!

Jesus' response to these questions is simply to show us that it can be done. He calls men and women to turn away from sin, but he does not condemn sinners. At the Last Supper, he gives himself lavishly and freely to his sinful followers, who cannot repay. As a human being, Christ knows temptation. He knows how it feels to want to strike back. He knows the drive to flee from pain. He is hard-wired to save his own life. But he loves those who hate him, he blesses those who curse him, he is good to the ungrateful and compassionate to the wicked. He hangs on the Cross and forgives those who put him there.

Jesus does not simply issue commands. He shows by example. He teaches the way of mercy and forgiveness by living the way of mercy and forgiveness. And to all of us who count ourselves holy when we show care for a loving parent, forgive a loving spouse, or are generous to relatives and friends who have been generous to us, Jesus says, "Even sinners love those who love them." We can almost always manage to show love to those who love us. That's good - but Jesus wants more.

This Wednesday, another Lent arrives, a season which seems to fly in the face of all our hard-wiring. The Christian journey begins with the joy of Christmas and ends with the glory of Easter, but it passes through the pain of conversion, the demand of a new commandment, the painful struggle to be more than we have been before. Christ knows us, and he is patient and

compassionate. Not according to our sins does he deal with us, but according to his mercy. It is more than we deserve - but that is the point. Christ asks us to give more, and shows us how, here, on this altar. As the Son of God, he gives all that he is in the bread and wine so that we children of God might have the strength to give of ourselves to others. That requires a strength which is more than natural. That is why the Father gave us Christ. That is why Christ sends the Spirit. That is why the Spirit is our grace.