

Homily: March 4, 2023

By Fr. Virgil Petermeier, osc

Today, Jesus invites us to love beyond the normal and beyond the norms. He calls us to love our enemies, which is highly counter-cultural for most societies worldwide. We often and automatically limit our love to those who are friendly and loving to us. With this awareness, we call upon our compassionate God.

Jesus calls us to stretch ourselves—expand our love to include our enemies or people who are a challenge for us to love. Our experiences tell us that it's hard to love those people we don't spontaneously like, or for various reasons, we don't want to approach. Yet, it is precisely when we shower some form of goodness on these people that our love grows. Such intentional goodness is the cross that brings us new life. Jesus taught us that lesson through his own life.

How is such love possible? By being as totally as possible focused on who God is. Jesus said, "Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect." "Perfect" in the Gospel does not mean "perfectionistic" or "without blemish." So what does "perfect" mean in the Gospel? It is being single-minded in committing ourselves as totally as possible to loving like God does. Jesus described God as the one who sends the blessings of rain and sunshine on the good and bad; on the just and unjust. God loves impartially. So impartial or inclusive love is to be our kind of love, too. We must love as impartially and wholeheartedly as possible. That's exactly what Jesus called us to do when he said, love the Lord God with all your heart and with all your soul.

I close with a short story about Felix Owom, an Asmat tribal leader, whose father participated years ago in headhunting and cannibalism. Felix is a baptized Catholic. He witnessed to impartial love in the following scene.

One day Felix's son came home with bruises from a beating by a merchant who suspected the youth had stolen from his store. Word about the beating quickly spread in Felix's village. The next day, Felix got the news that some men of his sub-clan were heading to town to beat up that merchant. Felix took off running the half-mile to the market in the city of Agats. He reached the merchant's store just in time. His clan members were already there. They were about to beat up the merchant. Felix ran to the side of that storekeeper and yelled back at his clan members. "I ask you not to beat this man. We still have mouths to talk."

What Felix did was culturally insane for this former warring society. But, he chose negotiating rather than revenge. I complimented him for his brave and seemingly "foolish" Christian stance. His being counter-cultural by being loyal to Christ's words inspired me. He is presently one of the prominent tribal leaders of his village.

So let us love impartially just as our heavenly Father loves impartially.