

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time, C

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I like what Jesus says in today's gospel reading. It is beautiful and inspiring. It is how I want to live and the way I want our world to be. But what do you and I do when we meet someone who is unlovable, hurts us through an unforgivable act, or really deserves our judgment and condemnation? It is often not this gospel.

I wonder if this gospel even makes sense in today's world of enemies, haters, cursers, and abusers. I am not saying we don't need today's gospel; we need it more than ever. But is it possible to live like that? Here is why I ask that question.

Have you ever ended a relationship or refused to see or speak with someone because he or she betrayed your confidence, spoke critically of your child or spouse, or didn't do what you thought should be done? From whom are you withholding forgiveness these days? When have you condemned or made a judgment about someone else's life and then enjoyed sharing the dirt with another? In what ways have you hit back with thoughts, words, or fists? Have you ever wanted to get even and hurt someone because they hurt you or someone you love?

Those, and a thousand others like them, are the real-life struggles that today's gospel holds before us. I know what that struggle is like, and I bet you do, too. We have all been there.

The world is complex. Relationships are difficult. Life is fragile. That's why we need today's gospel. And that's why it matters. But it is not easy.

I don't think Jesus intends his words to be a "how to" lesson. He is not telling us how to love, reconcile, forgive, be merciful, or offer generosity. That's ours to figure out, not his. His words are intended **"to stir thought, trouble sleep, and provide some wider perspective."**

He is not telling us what to see; he is teaching us how to see. He is not giving us the answers; he is inviting us to ask better questions. And that's what I want us to do. I want us to consider some questions about four themes that I think run through today's gospel: tension, behavior, choice, and pain.

We all live in the gap between today's gospel and our own patterns of thinking and behaving. We are always negotiating the distance between Jesus' teaching and the reality of our daily lives.

Do you feel that tension in your life? What parts of today's gospel conflict with and challenge your words and actions, the messages with which you grew up, and the values that direct and drive your life?

In each of our lives there are contradictions between who we say we are and who we show ourselves to be, between our beliefs and actions, between our life in Christ and our life in the world. How are you holding that tension, and which side is winning?

We often think of faith as being about what we believe, but what about our behavior? What if faith is about how we live? What if it is about doing the gospel?

Look at your actions and listen to your words in light of today's gospel. What do you see? What do you hear? Where is their alignment, and where is their misalignment? What consequences are your words and actions having on others? Is what you say and do corresponding with today's gospel? What behaviors do you need to change or stop for the well-being of another or yourself?

Every day, you and I make one of two choices. We either choose to be large or we choose to be small. And what we choose affects others.

If we choose to be small, we will keep score, act violently, seek retribution, and condition our relationships on who the other is and what he or she does.

If we choose to be large, it will be in recognition that something other than security, protection, power, and balancing books is seeking our attention and animating our lives. It will call us to be less fearful, less suspicious, less anxious, and less needy. It will change our attitudes toward others. It will create space for others.

Which are you choosing these days? Are you choosing the large or the small? Are you choosing another or yourself? What would it look like to choose the large and live large in your life today? And what would that take?

One of the things I know is that the pain of the world is great. Everyone has a story of pain hidden behind the life she or he shows the world. I can never really know what is going on in the life of another. Maybe that's why Jesus tells us not to judge or condemn but to be forgiving. Maybe that's why Jesus tells us to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who mistreat us. Maybe that's why we are not to return violence for violence. Because we don't really know the other's story.

Not knowing is why we must continue to hold the tension, pay attention to our behavior, and choose the large.

You and I may not be able to diminish or take away the pain of the world, but neither do we have to add to it. That's the bottom line for me in today's gospel. Are you and I adding to the pain of the world, to the pain of another? And if we are, what needs to change?

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Chances are there is someone in each of our lives hanging on by a thread: a family member, a friend, a colleague, a stranger, someone who is a fixture in our life, or someone who is just passing through. Sometimes, we know they are hanging on by a thread; other times, we don't. They need love, mercy and forgiveness, prayer, blessing, compassion, generosity, the benefit of the doubt, an open heart, and open hands. We all know what that's like; we have been there too.

Let's not be the scissors that cut their thread. **Amen.**