If Jesus were trying to establish himself as a popular preacher, we might think he's going about it the wrong way. If today's Gospel were a current news item or someone's blog post, we can just imagine the angry comments that would follow it. “What do you mean we're supposed to love our enemies?” “Are you saying we have to love terrorists?” “People are too worried about being politically correct. I should be able to say whatever I want.”

But Jesus was never much interested in popularity contests or good ratings. He was interested only in the truth. And that truth was, as the old hymn says, “the truth sent down from above.” Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Compromise simply wasn't an option for him. Nor is it for us.

The people of Jesus's day had as many prejudices and stereotypes as anyone in our own society. Jews and Samaritans, Romans and Palestinians, Greeks and Galileans—the Gospels and Paul's letters are filled with examples of one group setting itself against another over politics, over religious rules and rituals, over language and way of life.

Those listening to Jesus would have reacted as predictably as we would to these words. And there's no way to soften them. Jesus says what he says. We can choose to believe it, we can even choose to follow it. What we can't do is deny that he said it.

Too often we deal with our natural discomfort with the high standard of the Gospel by trying to explain it away or to soften it. We pretend that the hard sayings aren't part of Bible. We ignore those passages that make us uneasy, that threaten our preconceived ideas, that upset our comfortable worldview.

One of the great gifts to our faith that the Catholic lectionary provides is that the wisdom of the Church has chosen for us the texts that we will read and hear on any given Sunday. Priests and deacons don't have the option of choosing the text for their sermons. And the lectionary is arranged to cover all of the Gospels, not just the stories that we like to hear. Jesus doesn't tell his followers that their lives are going to be easy. Nor does he tell them that they will always get their way. He frequently reminds them that they will be persecuted. The beginning of this Sermon on the Mount that we've been hearing for the past several Sundays even says, “Blessed are you when they persecute you.” We shouldn't be surprised, then, when his words make us uncomfortable. There's simply no way around the hard sayings in the Gospel.

Preachers and psychologists are fond of saying that love is not an emotion, it's an act of the will. Teachers and managers remind those who whine and complain, “That's why they call it work.” The same thing is true of faith. When we make a commitment, whether it's to another person, a community, or God, there will be times when keeping that commitment is not going to be easy and probably isn't going to feel all warm and fuzzy. The important thing is that we stick to the commitment we've made.

As we go through this week, we might think about the hard words of Jesus. Instead of arguing those words or trying to explain them away, simply say, “Yes.”

**SUNDAY READINGS**

**Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18**
Moses challenges the people to model their own holiness after the holiness of God. They will do so if they put others first.

**1 Corinthians 3:16-23**
Paul reminds the community that they are God's Temple. They are to be holy and mutually helpful, united to Jesus and his Father.

**Matthew 5:38-48**
Jesus calls his followers to be whole and complete just as God is whole and complete. He gives concrete examples.
Despite Jesus’s admonition to “turn the other cheek,” we live in a society bent on taking justice to an extreme that might have made the Pharisees blush. How does this compare with the words of a Savior who tells us to offer our shirt to someone who sues for our coat? Or to go a second mile when conscripted to walk a first? It’s only human nature to keep track of the many times we’ve been wronged and to forget how many times we’ve wronged others. The physical or emotional hurt that accompanies insult or injury reminds us that the world is not fair.

As Christians, we are invited to embrace the news that the world is not fair. If it were, if we were held accountable for every error, large or small, if we truly got what we deserved, we might have far more to complain about than at present. In imitating Jesus, we adopt mercy rather than justice as our yardstick and find that everyone measures up well.

St. Francis may have done this better than anyone since Jesus himself. His definition of perfect joy was to respond with love and patience to all that happened. It’s a secret many of us have yet to learn.

Lord,
your words bring comfort and discomfort, your words bring inner peace and inner conflict. Be with me as I wrestle with those words. Remind me that in the end your words always—always!—bring life. Amen.

It is not hard to imagine what would happen to a political or religious leader today who preached what Jesus was teaching in the Gospel: love your enemies, go the extra mile, give to everyone who begs from you. Whether that person would be injured in a riot or merely ostracized is a moot point, but the message would find little acceptance.

All of us are tempted to being at least a little bit selfish. We work hard, we do our best—don’t we deserve a slice of the proverbial pie? Jesus reminds us that we’re swimming in the gifts of God. We have life and the hope of eternity: Do we really want to quibble with our neighbors over whose car is the most shiny?

St. Paul tells us that if we must compete, we should compete to be merciful, generous, and loving. Once we recognize how much we truly have, it becomes a lot easier to give some of it away.

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