

A small man that walked into a restaurant, sat down to eat, and a big bully sitting on a barstool got up and walked over to that little man and chopped him across the neck; knocked him flat on the floor. As the man was getting up, the big man said, "*That's karate from Japan.*"

Well, the smaller man rubbed his neck, sat back down and tried to eat his meal. A few minutes later the big man returned, picked the little man off the chair, threw him over his shoulder and said, "*That's Judo from Japan.*"

Well, the little man walked out of the restaurant with the big man laughing at him. He returned fifteen minutes later, walked up behind the bully, cracked him over the head and said, "*That's crowbar from Sears.*"

Even though the first line of today's gospel rather uncompromisingly says, "love you neighbor, do good to those who persecute you," the truth is that most of us would, at least secretly, applauded the little guy with the crowbar.

I still remember a guy I once met while in the Air Force. He told me he was Christian to a point. To what point I asked. He said, "*If someone strikes me on one cheek, I will turn the other. But if he strikes me on that cheek, watch out!*"

A lot of people would prefer to stick with the Old Testament line that goes, **an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.**

Granted that was a big step forward in a society where extreme revenge and endless vendettas were more the rule, but it isn't what Jesus asked of us.

Some scholars have said that the injunction to love your neighbor was only meant as a temporary thing. The early church expected Jesus to return quickly and it was like holding your breath. You can do it for a while. But Jesus did not immediately return, and the church was stuck with an ethical command no one can live up to. But Jesus was about eternal truths not temporary fixes.

St. Paul, who had probably heard about the saying even though he wrote before the gospels were completed, puts an interesting twist on it. Quoting from the often less than inspiring book of Proverbs, he says, "If your enemy is hungry feed him, if he is thirsty give him drink, for by so doing you heap burning coals upon his head." Loving your enemy, it turns out, is just another way to do him in. I doubt if that is what Jesus had in mind either.

It is much easier to avoid sexual immorality than it is to avoid hatred, particularly when we have been hurt, but that is what Jesus is calling us to do. It is much easier to sacrifice our wants for the needs of others, then it is to avoid lashing out at someone who has attacked someone in our family, but that is what Jesus is calling us to do.

Is the Lord asking too much? Is he expecting too much of us?

No, He is only telling us to be forgiving so we can receive forgiveness; we are told to be compassionate as our Heavenly Father is Compassionate.

That word compassionate means to be concerned with human welfare and the alleviation of suffering by being charitable, sympathetic, and merciful. We all live under the mercy of God. We are all dependent on His care, His understanding. We are called to offer that same care, that understanding in the most difficult circumstance, to offer compassion to those who have assaulted us in any way whatsoever.

So who is it that you and I still hold a grudge over? And why is it that we are allowing God's mercy to be limited by our anger for another person? And why is it that we feel justified in adding our anger to the sum of hatred in the world? Does that mean that we are to forgive and forget? Forgive, yes, but sometimes it is neither reasonable nor prudent to forget. We may need to remember for the sake of protecting ourselves or others from those who commit crimes against us. But we still need to forgive.

Ok, but how do we do that? How are we supposed to love our enemies? Can we take a pill, or quote a verse or say a prayer which changes our hearts? If I do not love someone, can I twist myself around, convince myself that in fact I do love them? Can I banish, as if by sleight of hand, my negative attitude? I can't make myself love those I detest, or who detest me. If you can, please share your secret.

If I cannot feel differently, perhaps I can act differently, and the difference in how I act is the only way I will be able to change my mind. "*Bless those who curse you,*" says Jesus. "*Pray for those who abuse you ... To a person who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other ... And as you wish that people would do to you, do so to them.*" The secret is in the doing. I may not be able to control my feelings, nor can I pretend to feel differently than I do. But I can control my actions. As I have told people in confession: It is often easier to act your way into a new set of feelings, than it is to feel your way into a new set of actions.

If I am on the outs with someone and I wait until my opinion, my mood or my feelings change, chances are I will wait forever. The only hope of breaking the log-jam is if one of us, namely me, changes how I act. I may not be able to change my attitude unless I first change my behavior. That may be the only hope I have of turning my enemy into a friend.

As Chuck jogged by her house he saw her peeking out from behind the curtains and he recalled the hurt she had inflicted upon his mother. At one time the woman in the window had been the matriarch of the congregation. His memories of her were not fond. He recalled her wicked tongue and the way she used it to cut down others. He never forgot the day she used it against his mother making her cry. That incident caused their family to leave the church where he had been baptized and confirmed.

Here it was fifteen years later, and now all he saw was a picture of someone desperately needing to be loved. Praying for the ability to forgive her, he stopped and went to her door. The curtain quickly closed as he rang her doorbell. Hesitantly she cracked the door.

"Hello, Mrs. Smith. Do you remember me? I'm Marge's son." Her eyes widened in surprise as a note of recognition appeared. *"I live in Arizona now, and I'm here on vacation. I saw you in the window and just wanted to stop and say hello. May I come in?"* She hesitated and then opened the door and asked him in.

"Forgive, and you will be forgiven" Jesus tells us The jogger considered Mrs. Smith an antagonist, a person who had sought to hurt, showed ill-will, and caused injury. Transferring to another church, moving to another town, and maturing did not eliminate how he felt about her. But on that day, he saw a bitter, old woman who needed God's love. On that day he could change his actions. Right there and then he made a conscious decision to forgive her for the past harm she had inflicted. Hopefully, she would receive it.

Even if she didn't, it would be sas but he would be free.