

A patient walked into a psychiatrist's office for his first session. As he sat down he noticed a copy of the bible on the doctor's coffee table. "Don't tell me that even you read the bible?" "I not only read the bible I meditate with it. It is the greatest textbook on human behavior that has ever been written. If people followed its teachings, doctors like me could close up shop and go fishing."

The doctor makes an interesting observation; and one that is supported by the comments that Jesus makes in our gospel today.

"Do not take revenge on someone who harms you." Jesus, the master teacher is instructing his followers to take the high road when it comes to confrontation. "Should someone press you into service for one mile, go for two."

To appreciate the impact of this last statement on the crowd he is addressing we have to first understand the climate of the time. At the time of Jesus Palestine was held in the grip of the Roman Empire's troops. They were an intimidating presence in the life of the Jews.

If a Roman soldier tapped a Jew on the shoulder with his sword it meant that the Jew would be immediately pressed into service. Remember in Jesus' climb to Calvary when Simon of Cyrene was forced into the service of carrying Jesus' cross. A soldier could force a person at any time to carry his pack for a mile and not expect resistance. Imagine the resentment and anger that could be produced by such treatment. Jesus recognized this dilemma and instructed his disciples not to succumb to their emotions but to react in a positive way. If they want you to carry a load one mile, go ahead and carry it two miles. To hate an enemy does nothing to the enemy except to give them control of one's life. It gives them power over one's sleep, power over one's blood pressure and power over one's health and happiness. Hate and resentment is useless and self destructive.

So when Jesus instructs his followers to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors he is introducing a new direction, a healthier direction. He offers a higher standard of human love which releases love to where it is most needed.

With this new approach, Jesus is asking us to strive to be a complete disciple; well rounded, well balanced and mature. He is guiding us to be a person of faith, who seeks with deep longing to be the witness and embodiment of his good news. We can be people who bear the weight of this unjust world with unconditional love. As God's people we can show kindness and mercy to everyone who crosses our path. It is this unconditional love that we celebrate in the Eucharist at this sacred altar. We witness the selflessness of our God being poured out in the death and resurrection of his only Son. Sharing in this Eucharist we grow in our ability to love unconditionally and give generously without counting the cost. And one more psychiatrist closes up shop and heads for the lake with his rod and his reel.