

Monsignor Dennis Sheehan
Homily Given on February 18, 2007
7th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Liturgical Year C

Children's books often say a great deal about reality. I came across a children's book recently. Its title is "I'll Fix Anthony". The narrator is a younger brother who complains about how the older brother Anthony treats him. "My brother Anthony can read books but won't read one to me ever. He plays checkers with his friend Bruce, but, when I want to play, he says, "Get out before I clobber you." Mother says deep down Anthony loves me. Anthony says he thinks I stink. When he says he's going to clobber me, I have to run, but I won't have to run when I'm six. When I'm six, I'll fix Anthony."

That's the way it is. Fix him. Get even. Look at our bumper stickers:

Do unto others before they get unto you.

I don't get mad, I get even.

Keep honking – I'm reloading.

Caution – I brake for tailgaters.

To err is human – to forgive is out of the question.

That's what makes today's Gospel so remote and impossible:

Love enemies. Turn the other cheek.

Give to beggars.

Don't judge.

Forgive – everyone.

What's going on? Well, it may not make a lot of sense, but it's typical Jesus. Two things, in fact are going on at the same time in this Gospel. Look at them.

First of all, Jesus is setting other standards of behavior. They're the opposite of "I'll Fix Anthony" or most bumper stickers. Once again, Jesus is taking our world, our values, our canons of reasonable behavior and turning them upside down. It's hard to live in a nation where war is just an ordinary instrument of international behavior and read this Gospel. It's hard to live in a society that collectively sees capital punishment as simply right and read this Gospel. We understand "I'll Fix Anthony". We don't – let's face it – often understand Jesus.

If Jesus is setting new standards, he's doing so for deeper reasons. He's not simply reversing old behavior. Listen to him. By forgiving, by not judging, by going the extra mile and turning the other cheek, you're acting like God. That's right. Hear it again. By acting that way, you will be children of the most high, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. You're to be merciful because that's the way God is.

In the end, Jesus is challenging not so much our behavior as our picture of God. If God has these crazy standards so different from our own, what does that say to us? Jesus is saying quite simply, God is very different. Not about reciprocity. Not about cold justice. Not about getting even. Those are your interests and mine. But they're not God's. God is not interested in who wins. God is likely to be more interested in what we regard as losers. God is not part of "I'll get you". God might be more interested in who you're getting. This is about what God is like. Jesus is saying that this should make a difference to you or me.

Vengeful behavior is its own reward. Martin Luther King said in the midst of the civil rights struggle: If you live by "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, you wind up with a nation of blind and toothless people".

Is it possible to learn the kind of behavior Jesus is talking about? Yes – and I say it unreservedly – yes. Some of you might have taken golf lessons. In golf lessons, you learn unnatural behavior. You learn to grip a club with an interlocking hand that feels weird. You learn a stance that seems very artificial. You learn to keep one arm straight and the other arm bent. You learn to swivel your hips like a ballet dancer. This is all for a game, but you do it. And lo! you become that American idol – a golfer.

So Jesus challenges all of us a few days away from Lent. Only he's not about golf but about life before God. He says love your enemies – yes, even her. He says forget about who's paying you back. He says lots of other upside-down inside-out things. But if God is like Jesus says he is, acting that way is a serious issue.

How about this for Lent? Try one of Jesus's behaviors. Keep score. Fine yourself every time you fail. Give your fines to the Rice Bowl. Sure, it might be full by Ash Wednesday. But remember that Jesus didn't come to be reasonable. He came to change us – to make us more like God. That's a Lenten program for you. As one writer said: Love your enemies— it will drive them nuts!