

The Rev. Daren J. Zehnle  
Annunciation Parish, Shumway, Illinois  
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The Seventh Sunday of the Year (C)

With the Lenten season only days away - though the snow makes it seem more like Advent - Jesus exhorts us strongly to model our lives on His own. Today He is blunt, direct, and straight to the point: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

Who among us lives up to this challenge? Who among us keeps faithfully this command? Although "merciful and gracious is the Lord," we, all too often, are not (Psalm 103:8). We hold our grudges, we talk behind each other's backs, we spread gossip, slander, lie and cheat. We murder each other in our hearts and think ourselves better than others.

We, like Abishai, too often whisper to our friends and to ourselves: "God has delivered your enemy into your grasp this day. Let me nail him to the ground with one thrust of the spear; I will not need a second thrust!" (I Samuel 26:8). But even as we think this thought the words of Jesus resound in our ears like a clanging gong: "To you who hear I say, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who persecute you" (Luke 27-28).

We know that we are very much like Adam who did not truly love the Lord, and that we are not always like Jesus Christ, the

second Adam. We also know, though, that Jesus Christ does not act as the first Adam does; He does not deal with us as we deal with those who do not love us, because He Himself is Love. Indeed, the words of the Psalmist are true: "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him" (Psalm 103:13).

The fullness of His compassion - of His great love for us and of His desire to suffer with us - is made manifest in Jesus Christ, "who gives flesh and blood to those concepts in an unprecedented realism" (*Deus caritas est*, 12).

The Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI recently wrote to the youth of the world:

The manifestation of divine love is total and perfect in the Cross where, we are told by Saint Paul, "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Therefore, each one of us can truly say: "Christ loved me and gave himself up for me" (cf. Ephesians 5:2). Redeemed by His blood, no human life is useless or of little value, because each of us is loved personally by Him with a passionate and faithful love, a love without limits.

Today, Jesus offers to us an invitation to follow in His way of being, to follow in His way of loving, to love each other as He loves us.

In his Message for Lent, Pope Benedict XVI reminds everyone that through the extension of this gracious invitation, the Almighty awaits the "yes" of His creatures as a bridegroom that of his bride. Unfortunately, from its very origins, mankind, seduced by the lies of the Evil One, rejected God's love in the illusion of a self-sufficiency that is impossible (cf. Genesis 3:1-7). Turning in on himself, Adam withdrew from that source of life who is God Himself, and became the first of "those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage" (Hebrews 2:15). God, however, did not give up. On the contrary, man's "no" was the decisive impulse that moved Him to manifest His love in all its redeeming strength.

It is in the mystery of the Cross that the overwhelming power of the heavenly Father's mercy is revealed in all of its fullness. In order to win back the love of His creature, He accepted to pay a very high price: the blood of His only begotten Son. Death, which for the first Adam was an extreme sign of loneliness and powerlessness, was thus transformed in the supreme act of love and freedom of the new Adam.

Through this transformation of death Christ has redeemed us and made us members of the household of God. Through His death,

we are given the promise of eternal life, joy and peace. "Just as we have borne the image of the earthly one," says Saint Paul, "we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one" (I Corinthians 15:49). We bear the image of Jesus Christ when we do as he has already done for us and as he continues to do for us: when we love to the point of death, when we forgive those who have wronged us and when we give to those in need.

This is why Holy Mother Church proposes for us the three-fold Lenten practices of increased prayer, fasting and alms giving. It is through prayer that we learn to love authentically and selflessly. It is through fasting that we learn to forgive and grow in love. It is through alms giving that we give to the poor and share the love of Christ.

The Holy Father is praying that the coming season of Lent "be for every Christian a renewed experience of God's love given to us in Christ, a love that each day we, in turn, must "regive" to our neighbor, especially to the one who suffers most in need".

As we reflect today, then, on the admonitions of the Savior, we must prayerfully consider these questions: First, do I know the transforming of his love? If not, am I willing to allow myself to experience it? Second, do I share the love of Christ with everyone around me? These two questions should be the springboard from which we choose our Lenten practices.

Whatever we choose to do this Lent should help to conform us ever more closely to Christ. Whatever penance we take up should help us to grow in faith, in hope and in love.

Ultimately it comes down to our response to the invitation of the Lord to love as he loves us. Will you accept his invitation? Will you politely decline until another day? Will you simply refuse his invitation to love?

"The response the Lord ardently desires of us is above all that we welcome His love and allow ourselves to be drawn to Him. Accepting His love, however, is not enough. We need to respond to such love and devote ourselves to communicating it to others. Christ "draws me to Himself" in order to unite Himself to me, so that I learn to love the brothers with His own love (Message for Lent 2007).

In his Message to the youth of the world, the Holy Father said:

My dear young friends, I want to invite you to "dare to love." Do not desire anything less for your life than a love that is strong and beautiful and that is capable of making the whole of your existence a joyful undertaking of giving yourselves as a gift to God and your brothers and sisters, in imitation of the One who vanquished hatred forever through love (cf. Revelation 5:13).

I, too, wish to extend this invitation, not only to the youth,  
but to every member of the Body of Christ.