

## *Getting Under our Skin*

Homily for September 9, 2021  
Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> Week Ordinary Time

From his earliest days in politics, the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln had a critic, an enemy, who continually treated him with contempt, a man by the name of Edwin Stanton. Stanton would say to newspaper reporters that Lincoln was a "low cunning clown" and "the original gorilla". He said it was ridiculous for explorers to go to Africa to capture a gorilla "when they could find one easily in Springfield, Illinois." Lincoln never responded to such slander; he never retaliated in the least. And when, as President, he needed a Secretary of War, he selected Edwin Stanton. When his friends asked why, Lincoln replied, "Because he is the best man for the job."

Years later, that fateful night, April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1865 came when an assassin's bullet murdered the president in a theater. Lincoln's body was carried off to another room. Stanton came, and looking down upon the silent, rugged, face of his dead President, he said through his tears, "There lies the greatest ruler of men the world has ever seen." Stanton's animosity had finally been broken. How? By Lincoln's patient, long-suffering, non-retaliatory love.

This is the love that is expressed by the Lord in today's Gospel reading. In this text, Jesus concludes by saying that when we learn to love like God, there is a generosity expressed in our lives that is like an overflowing grain basket. Listen again to how the Lord states it in a paraphrase of the last part of our reading:

***“Don’t pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults—unless, of course, you want the same treatment. Don’t condemn those who are down; that hardness can boomerang. Be easy on people; you’ll find life a lot easier. Give away your life; you’ll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity.”***

Jesus makes it clear that the treatment we show to others will determine the treatment we ourselves receive. What a clear reminder that God lives within those around us, even our enemies, and that the way we treat them can impact our own capacity to receive God's love.

So what happens when someone you consider an enemy walks into that room? Maybe someone who has betrayed you or whose life choices you find offensive?

Now, most of us, when faced with this challenging person, would probably not lash out or do anything to embarrass them. We may just try to ignore them or push them from our thoughts. But what if God whispers in your ear, "I want you to go up to that person and greet them warmly"? What if he tells you, "I love that person just as deeply and compassionately as I love you? Can you please share that love with them?" That might be more of a challenge. But this is what Jesus meant when he told us to love our enemies. He wants our love to be as full and unconditional as his. That's what will make us "children of the Most High" in the truest sense of the word (Luke 6:35).

Jesus spoke Aramaic. In that language the word used for “mercy” means literally "to get under someone's skin." It means to wear his skin, as it were; to see life from his perspective, to stand in his shoes. It means more than sympathy; it means active empathy or merciful understanding.

So often people that truly irritate us and oppose us get under our skin so that we become irritable and embittered, resulting in discord, animosity and even retaliation. But as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved we are to allow Jesus to get under our skin. This is so that in the words of St. Paul the peace of Christ to rule in our hearts as we clothe ourselves with Christ like compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. When Jesus gets under our skin we can look at that other person as Abraham Lincoln looked on Edwin Stanton

May we resolve this day to put into practice a specific expression of charity described in our readings, to allow Jesus to get under our skin, so that we can extend his mercy and so live the generous life of merciful grace.

Lord Jesus, you ask no small thing of me when you invite me to love as you do, to let my heart be configured to yours, and learn to give, live, and forgive like you. Grant that I may always live in openness before you, receiving your love, so that I can give it and so that you can make yourself present in the world through me.