

Homily for the Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time (A)

St. Joseph's Neier/Mass and More

February 22-23, 2014

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Central Idea: When we live in a world of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” we will certainly all become blind and toothless.

*"More than the cherry blossoms, Inviting a wind to blow them away,
I am wondering what to do, With the remaining springtime."*

The notion of defending one's honor can be a bit daft at times.

This is a true story...for the most part.

You are in 18th century feudal Japan. The code of the land is bushido, the moral code of the samurai, a code that values the noble combination of frugality, courage, honesty, loyalty and honor.

There is a feudal lord named Asano Naganori. Apparently, he was a good man, just and honest and devout in all of his dealings. One of the people he had to deal with was a royal official of the shogun named Kira Yoshinaka. (The names sound like Pokeman characters.) Kira was a bit of a jerk, a jerk who wanted Asano to line his pockets with bribes as well as insulting him. He dissed him as the kids would say. At first, so the story goes, Asano, being the pious and devout man he was, kept a stiff upper lip and stoically ignored Kira's rude and offensive abuse. But a man can only take so much. He finally burst at Kira with a dagger and cut his face, but missed with a second swipe. Guards quickly got between the two, but Asano, from that moment on, was a dead man. He had violated a serious edict against drawing any type of weapon in the Edo palace. Asano would either be executed or be allowed to commit seppuku, hara-kiri, if you will, a ritual form of suicide reserved for samurai. His goods and his lands would be confiscated, his family ruined and his boys, his samurai, would become ronin, leaderless soldiers. And so Asano quietly wrote his death poem, the poem I began this homily with, and killed himself.

But his ronin were a loyal lot, loyal and patient. 47 of them, so the story goes, plotted to uphold Asano's honor. In fact, there was a movie, a bad one, called 47 Ronin, that came out over the holidays. Keanu Reeves!! They waited and waited and waited for the right time to get revenge on the hated Kira. Two years they waited. I told you they were patient. It would not be easy, for Kira was well guarded. But the plot they hatched *was* fairly easy if you take your time.

This is how they did it. Divorce your wives, act like drunken boors in public, frequent geisha houses and in doing so, convince Kira that they were no longer noble, loyal

samurai of their wronged master. They had instead become men like that surely would *not* avenge their lord. One of the ronin went so far as to marry the daughter of the man who built Kira's house so that they would know the floor plan. Little by little, the 47 ronin, got access to Kira.

On January 30, 1703 (I told you this was relatively historically accurate), the plot went go into action. They were so noble that they went so far to tell Kira's neighbors of their intentions and the neighbors were glad to help because, shucks, they all hated Kira as well. They made their way in, eventually found the scoundrel and beheaded him. Then they took Kira's head and placed it on the tomb of their master, Asano. Word got out and spread rapidly. Everyone was happy in the land because Kira really was a jerk. But according to the law, the ronin were, in fact, guilty of murder. Like their master, they were given a choice. So on March 20, 1703, 46 ronin committed seppuku. (Apparently, one guy got lucky, was spared and lived a nice and fairly long life.) There are other aspects of this story, but I only have 7 minutes. But you get the general idea.

So what do you think?? Were the ronin noble or nuts? Did they live out the righteous virtues of bushido, or did they go over the top? When is revenge acceptable?

Our gospel today is simply one of the most challenging in the entire Word of God, bar none! Love your enemies? Pray for your persecutors? Turn the other cheek? Do not seek revenge? Is Jesus serious??

Today we are asked to ponder seriously how we approach, how we deal with, how we react to our enemies, the "Kira's" of our lives, if you will. They are the people who mess with us for practically no reason whatsoever, the people who seemingly love to make our lives difficult and painful. We all have those individuals, even good old Fr. Kevin, and our Lord invites us to rethink our reactions to them, the rules of retribution, revenge and the regaining of our precious honor. In effect, he says 'suck it up and get over yourself.'

Two things about this. Jesus is not suggesting we put up with abuse. There are demands of justice. Jesus is not saying that people should merely get away with crimes and evil behavior. I especially think this is important to understand when someone else is abused. We cannot and must not stand idly by. Justice must be served.

But does revenge? The story of the 47 ronin, for me at least is a cautionary tale. Two years? Two years of plotting. Two years of planning. Two years of hate. It appears to me at least, an enormous waste of time. And that is exactly what the grudges of our lives are all about. They are wastes of time. My favorite quote about this is from the late comedian Buddy Hackett of all people, who said: "While your holding a grudge, the other person is out dancing." It is a waste of our energy.

My other favorite quote is from the musical Fiddler on the Roof: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and the world is blind and toothless. We have seen places in our world where ethnic hatred have continued for thousands of years. How is that working out for them? In other words, revenge may seem sweet, but it simply prolongs and encourages more and more violence and hatred. Check out Palestine or Bosnia or Northern Ireland or any number of places in the world where ancient hatred still festers.

We need to rethink revenge. It is not the way of Christ, it is not the way of life. From what I read it may not even be the way of the samurai. Get over it. Let it go. The Kira's of our world will get theirs eventually, without you having to worry about them, or, dare I say it, plot against them for two years.

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There are so many better things to do with the remaining springtime.