

Text: Matthew 5:38-48
Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A
19 February 2017
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Perhaps you saw Theresa Frazer and me on the front page of the Whidbey News-Times yesterday. Just before midnight on Wednesday night, two men slipped into the Prayer Garden [at St Augustine Church] and went up to the Our Lady Plaza, the shrine to Mary. They pried the statute of Mary, Queen of Peace - 5 feet tall and solid granite - off of her pedestal. They dragged Mary down the steps and threw her onto the bricks of the Plaza. They smeared dirt over her. They broke off her thumbs and tried to smash in her face. Finally, one of the men put his baseball cap over Mary's head and face. Then they went after the stones of the shrine itself, breaking them and throwing them on the ground.

When the reporter from the Whidbey News-Times came to take photos and gather info for her story, she said, "I'm not Catholic, and I'm shocked." Shocked at the pure hate behind the destruction. Because this wasn't simple vandalism or hooliganism; this clearly was a crime of hate, focused on the Virgin Mary, intended as a knife to the heart for us Catholics. And naturally, the first thought is to hit back, to hate in return, to get even.

But today, we have Jesus telling us, "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." And I want to say to Jesus, "Really? This is your *mother* we're talking about. Even *Pope Francis* has said, 'You insult my momma, I bop you in the nose!'" But the message of Jesus isn't just for when it's convenient or comfortable for us to listen to him, when Jesus agrees with what we are thinking. More often, the message of Jesus is there to challenge us, to raise us up and make us more than we would be naturally. And that's where Jesus stands before us today, not just in this matter of our desecrated Prayer Garden, but in every instance where someone has hurt us, injured us, treated us unfairly, and we want to lash out and hurt back.

But Jesus lays out an entirely different plan, in two steps. First, Christians don't seek vindication on their own. "When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one as well," Jesus instructs. Because God will vindicate us, God will take care of that other person or

institution. As passive as that seems, it is seriously putting our faith into action, rather than leaving it at words. And second, we don't just accept - Christians go the second mile. You know the idea of "Going the second mile" - in our culture it means to go beyond the kindness and charity that might be expected of you, and to do even more good! That phrase to *go the second mile* comes from Jesus, from today's Gospel, when Jesus tells all who follow him, "Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go for two miles." When Jesus said that, that was controversial. Israel was occupied by the Roman army, under the thumb of the Roman Empire, and a Roman soldier could require any Jew to carry his luggage for him, just as Simon of Cyrene was pressed into service to carry Jesus' cross for him when Jesus couldn't go any farther. How hard it must have been for Jesus' listeners to hear Jesus say, "You see these soldiers who have taken over our country and consider us as dirt beneath them - overwhelm them with your love, not with your hate. If a soldier asks you to carry his luggage for one mile, carry it the second mile." And that must have been as painful and challenging for Jesus' listeners to hear as it is for us to think of going the second mile with those who attacked the statue of Mary, Queen of Peace or with anyone who has hurt us. But there we have it - that's the challenge today.

When the reporter from the Whidbey News-Times asked, "Are you going to go ahead with the Garden?", Theresa Frazer - who serves on the Prayer Garden Commission - answered emphatically, "Of course we have to go ahead. Otherwise, they win." Hate never wins, especially if we answer hate with hate. If the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus tells us anything, it is that *Love* wins. And so, on Ash Wednesday morning, at 10:15 am after the first Mass, we will process in through the Prayer Garden, praying for God to restore holiness to this sacred space, praying for God to heal our injured spirits, and praying for those who did this to be set free from the power of hate and have their lives transformed by the love of the Savior Jesus Christ, and his Mother Mary. The shrine will be repaired, and the statue of Mary, Queen of Peace will be returned to her place, restored to the extent she can be. But, your mother has wrinkles - caused by you. Your mother has stretch marks - caused by you. And she's beautiful, because she's your mother. Our statue of Mother Mary will still bear her scars just as the Risen Jesus still bore the scars from the cross, to show what she suffers for her children, and to show us that love conquers hate.

When you come into the Our Lady Plaza in the Prayer Garden, the bricks beneath your feet as

you enter carry these words: "Let those who visit here be blessed with joy, love and peace." May that always be our message, as the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.