February 19, 2017 – Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
“God’s Love, and Our Reflection of It to Others, Says It All…”
Deacon Dave Snyder

Reading 1  Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18
The LORD said to Moses, “Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them: Be holy, for I, the LORD, your God, am holy.
“You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart. Though you may have to reprove your fellow citizen, do not incur sin because of him. Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against any of your people. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.”

Reading 2  1 Cor 3:16-23
Brothers and sisters: Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for the temple of God, which you are, is holy.
Let no one deceive himself. If any one among you considers himself wise in this age, let him become a fool, so as to become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God, for it is written: God catches the wise in their own ruses, and again: The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain.
So let no one boast about human beings, for everything belongs to you, Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or the present or the future: all belong to you, and you to Christ, and Christ to God.

Gospel  Matthew 5:38-48
Jesus said to his disciples: “You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one as well. If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand over your cloak as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go for two miles. Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.
“You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

HOMILY
When I was in diaconate formation, we were told of a homily once given on God’s love, where the homilist went to the ambo and said, and forgive me for paraphrasing here, “Love … love … love … God’s love says it all!” And then the homilist left the ambo and continued with the service. Now, we are going to talk about God’s love today, God’s infinite love towards each and every one of us, and how we are called to reflect that love to others, so maybe I’ll add just a few more words than that homily had.
In today’s Gospel reading we continue with Matthew’s Chapter 5, a chapter that forms the first part of the Sermon of the Mount, where Jesus welcomed all who have come to hear Him talk, including His closest disciples as well as the several thousand who came to see who this man was …
this man who preached, who healed, who loved all. You may remember that we began this chapter 3 weeks ago with the Beatitudes, and Jesus telling the crowds who were blessed in the Kingdom of God. He told of God’s love, available to all, but a love especially welcomed and appreciated by those who could take that love and reflect it to others … those poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the clean of heart, and others … those who could take God’s love and hold it deep within them, to help them through the journeys of their lives, and then help others through their life’s journeys. Two weeks ago, Jesus told His disciples that they were the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and that their light needed to be placed where it could shine to others, “that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.” Their light, their love reflecting God’s love that’s in their hearts. It reminds me somewhat of the credit card company that’s been advertising on television for several years now. Maybe you’ve seen some of the different commercials, as they all end with the same catch-phrase, “What’s in your wallet?” Well, looking at people who seem to hear and understand the message of God’s love, and reflect it to others, we would probably know the answer to the question, “What’s in your heart?”

Last weekend, we heard Jesus address four commandments from the Law, concerning killing, adultery, divorce and false oaths, but His words went beyond the written law, didn’t they. They brought in a different dimension of love – reconciling arguments, meaning what you say without taking an oath, being respectful of others in your thoughts and your words. In today’s Gospel, Jesus finishes with two other commandments from the law, perhaps a little different from the others because they just seem to go against our instincts, they seem to go against our reasoning. “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” was the Mosaic Law, and was not, as many believe even today, a means for getting even. It was intended to avoid escalating violence, where even simple matters could continue to intensify well beyond control. You can probably think of news stories like road rage and other situations that resemble that escalation, or maybe you’ve had personal encounters with others where tensions started small but grew much larger, maybe even to dangerous levels. Jesus’ three examples must have seemed outrageous to His disciples, and to many of us even now, as our actions sometimes show. Turn the other cheek, hand over your cloak as well, go an extra mile – the intent was not one of submission to an aggressor, but showing the love of God in different ways. First, there was instant forgiveness, but … how do you immediately forgive someone who is beating you or humiliating you? Jesus showed us how, at Calvary. Second, consider that action can be seen in another way – as an attempt to transform the aggressor through self-examination of his or her actions and maybe even leading to conversion of the aggressor. Think about it, for reasons of hygiene in the Middle-Eastern culture, even today, the left hand would not be used. The aggressor would use the right hand to slap someone on the right cheek, but with a backward slap, which would be considered a terrible insult, an action of a superior to an inferior. If the left cheek was then turned to, a slap with an open hand became an action between equals – no more superior/inferior, challenging and causing commotion to the social order. And with the tunic example, a person wore 2 items of clothing – an inner tunic and an outer cloak. If someone took your tunic in a court of law, and you handed over your cloak as well, imagine the uproar in the court from the resulting incident of complete and public nakedness.

Now you’re probably thinking, ‘Deacon Dave, things aren’t the same any more, people aren’t like that any more. That would never work in today’s society and culture – the world is more complex, much more dangerous, much more violent.’ Well, Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu who helped lead India to independence in the mid-1900’s, found Jesus’ teaching from this passage an inspiration in his own
non-violent struggle against what he perceived as the evil against the people in India. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr also was inspired by this passage, a few decades later. Reverend King is quoted as saying, “If we do an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, we will be a blind and toothless nation.” Gandhi brought it more universal when he said, “An eye for eye only ends up making the whole world blind.” Gandhi was also asked once why he didn’t follow Christ, since he quoted Him so often. He replied that he loved Christ, but many Christians were so unlike Him, and that they needed to live according to His teachings, as found in the Bible. And if they did, all of India would be Christian. Now, that’s a wake-up call to be more Christ-like to others, to reflect God’s love as Jesus said, as the commandments teach.

Jesus challenged His disciples, and He challenges us today with His teachings, and His exhortation, “So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” We are challenged to be more Christ-like, to reflect God’s love to others, no matter who they are. Jesus spoke to the Jewish people about the good and the bad, and the just and the unjust, because they would know what that meant in their society – tax collectors, gentiles, pagans, and others were considered the bad guys. In our society today, we put labels on who are the good guys and who are the bad guys. Several of us watched a movie the other night in the hall here, sponsored by our Consistent Life Ethic Team, The Armor of Light, with a lead-in line – can someone who is pro-life be pro-gun. That line could also have been, can someone who is pro-choice be a pacifist? An interesting conclusion was reached by most – people are generally good, but almost anyone has the capability to do bad things. Who, then, are the good guys and who are the bad ones? Does it depend on a particular moment in time, or a particular circumstance, or what? How can God’s love help when we are especially vulnerable, or to help others when needed?

What can we do? First, we can encourage good things in life, positive role models, positive actions, positive words, to each other, but especially to the youngsters, who are especially impressionable. Positive role models should not include Hollywood stars and starlets doing anything for additional notoriety, for example. Related to that, we need to attack poverty. A study was done by a former parishioner that showed children living in advantaged homes generally received much more positive encouragement while young, versus those in poverty situations who generally were exposed to much greater negative attention and influences.

Next, we are each on a spiritual journey through life, and our journey needs to be continually moving in a positive direction towards God, not standing still, and hopefully not back-sliding. We could look for good books and good DVDs to learn about our faith and why we believe what we do. And, of course, read the Bible often.

We can love our enemies by praying for them, praying for their change-of-heart, or their conversion to God as needed. Lent begins in 10 days, maybe think of someone who you have a rocky relationship with and say a prayer for that person each day during Lent.

There’s an old saying to be kind to everyone because everyone is fighting a hard battle of some sort. Keep that in mind in all matters with others.

Finally, actively live out the Gospel message by helping others whenever practical, volunteering and teaching, about God and God’s love to all of us.

God does love each of us. Love … love … love … God’s love, and our reflection of that love to others, says it all.