Homily, 24 February 2019
Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 Samuel 26:2-9,12-13,22-23; Psalms 103:1-2,3-4,8,10,12-13; 1 Corinthians 15:45-49; Luke 6:27-28

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you"

Sometimes we can be so familiar with something that we become indifferent to it, even though it may in fact be very challenging or even threatening.

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

"Stop judging and you will not be judged.
Stop condemning and you will not be condemned.

Jesus' teachings in today's Gospel are challenging, and if we think about them carefully, they might even be a little threatening, because actually living by those words can seem so objectionable to us: we demand justice, we like to brood over injuries, we hold grudges.

Did today's Gospel passage make you feel uncomfortable? I expect that it didn't, at least for most of us. We've heard these teaching so often, it just no longer has the impact that it ought to have.

So … I'd like to have you listen to these teaching in the form of a story -- a true story -- that I first read in a book by the Protestant theologican Miroslav Volf.

In his book “Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace,” Volf tells of the following encounter:

Ivo Marković, a Franciscan monk from Bosnia, was caught in the whirlwind of Yugoslav wars in the mid-1990s in which Croats, Bosnians, and Serbs were fighting each other -- with blood flowing and homes burning on all sides.

Muslim Bosnians had massacred twenty-one men from Šušanj [shooshange], the village in which Father Marković was born. Nine of them were members of his family – all feeble senior citizens, innocent of any crimes, the youngest of whom was his seventy-one-year-old father.
Three years after the massacre, in the fall of 1996, Father Marković visited Šušanj. Occupying the house in which his brother used to live was a fierce Muslim woman. He was warned not to go there because she brandished a rifle to protect her new home. He went anyway.

As he approached the house she was waiting for him, cigarette in her mouth and rifle cocked. She barked: “Go away, or I’ll shoot you.” “No, you won’t shoot me,” said Father Marković in a gentle but firm voice, “you’ll make a cup of coffee for me.”

She stared at him for a while, then slowly put the rifle down and went to the kitchen. Taking the last bit of coffee she had, she mixed in some already used grounds to make enough coffee for two cups. And they, deadly enemies, began to talk as they partook in the ancient ritual of hospitality: drinking coffee together.

She told him of her loneliness, of the home she had lost, of the son who never returned from the battlefield. When Father Marković returned a month later she told him: “I rejoice at seeing you as much as if my son had returned home.”

After telling the story Volf goes on:

“Did they talk about forgiveness? I don’t know. And in a sense, it doesn’t matter. He, the victim, came to her asking for her hospitality in his brother’s home, which she unrightfully possessed. And she responded. Though she greeted him with a rifle, she gave him a gift and came to rejoice at his presence. The humble, tenuous beginnings of a journey toward embrace were enacted through a ritual of coffee drinking. If the journey continues, it will lead through the difficult terrain of forgiveness.”

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I like the story of Fr. Marković, because it illustrates the attitudes and the behaviors Jesus urges us to adopt, -- even the aspects of judging and condemning.
Fr. Marković was able to distinguish between the actions or attitudes of the woman from the woman herself. She was wrong to be in his brother's house, wrong to threaten him with a gun, but he did not see her as an evil woman.

Maybe you find that you are estranged from someone: a former friend, a brother or a sister, your mom or dad, or perhaps even your spouse. Perhaps they have wronged you in some way and you are quite justifiably upset or even angry. Or maybe, there is someone who feels that way about you?

Whatever the situation, ponder the words of Jesus and consider how Father Marković lived out those teachings. Maybe you can find something – perhaps sharing a cup of coffee – that will help you begin the long road to forgiveness and reconciliation.