

***Homily for the 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A
St. Francis of Assisi Church, Belchertown
February 18/19, 2017***

In many sermons, especially in times past, God was presented as an ever-watchful Sheriff, raising a firm, cautioning finger toward us, and, as a subtext, the preacher would often add the words, “God sees you, even when no one else does.” It echoed the feelings of Job in the Old Testament, who was consumed by the idea that God was examining his every action. In exasperation Job asked, “How long before you look away from me, and let me alone till I swallow my spit?” And we hear in the Book of Sirach: “Their ways are ever known to him, they cannot be hidden from his eyes.”

But the notion of God as stern sheriff and judge, instead of drawing souls to him, can also do the opposite in some people. The late philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre said in his autobiography that, in the middle of an innocent boyhood hoax, he suddenly remembered the words, “God sees me.” Sadly, his response was that, by deliberate choice, he turned away from God, and became a bitter atheist for the remainder of his life. He wrote of the human person as a responsible but lonely being, directionless in a meaningless world, living in constant fear.

But God, from whom we come and to whom we are on our way, instead of fixing a cold and calculating eye on us, imparts life and joy and, if we simply have faith in him, a sense of being cared for - not because of what we do or the choices we make, but simply because God loves us. And not that we take advantage of it, we do know through the Parable of the Prodigal Son that God is indiscriminating and generous in his compassion.

God wants us to live life to the fullest, to grow, to come to maturity and

fulfillment. Alexander Pope’s expression, “To err is human; to forgive divine,” bears much truth and this eagerness to forgive is the unique attribute of our God. “Father forgive them,” Jesus prayed for his executioners, “because they know not what they do.” As the gospel points out, God treats all people alike: He causes the sun to rise on the bad as well as the good; his rain (a true blessing in to the ancient people in the dry land of Israel) falls on the just and the unjust alike.

And in our attitudes too, Christ tells us, there must be no spite, no hatred, no vindictiveness towards others. Indeed, He tells us, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

The pursuit of such spite, hatred and vindication (which we have all witnessed in our world, in our society, even in our parish and in families) are not of God. Yet even the first Christian communities became divided and partisan, some taking Paul’s side, others that of Apollos, or others, Cephas, as described in our second reading from the Letter to the Corinthians. But tensions also seem to give more purpose to a community; they compel people to spend more time in prayer, in dialogue, in working at the restoration of unity. St. Paul tell us, “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another, and forgiving one another... As the Lord has forgiven you, so you must you do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts.” (Colossians 3:12-15a) ✠