

Third Sunday of Easter

The Kansas City Royals are off to a good start this year, but in addition to an increase in victories, the team has an increase in a stat called “hit by pitch.” If the pitcher misses the strike zone so badly that the ball hits the batter, the umpire sends the batter to first base. In the first 7 games of the season, this happened 12 times to the Royals. By contrast, during the same period Royals pitchers hit an opposing batter twice. In baseball, a hit-by-pitch can lead to a fight. If a team feels that an opposing pitcher has deliberately hit a batter, then one of its pitchers may retaliate - usually by throwing a ball at a batter’s back between the shoulders where it hurts but doesn’t injure. Umpires then warn the benches that if this continues, somebody will be ejected. I wish teams wouldn’t do this. A better solution is to stand above this practice, play baseball, and score runs.

This little baseball drama reveals an unfortunate attitude prevalent in our culture. In many ways our culture teaches us to show no mercy: If someone hurts you, hurt that person back. Do not offer forgiveness, even if the offenders apologize, but especially they never say they’re sorry. Our culture teaches us that it’s better to stay angry than to show mercy.

After the crucifixion of Jesus the apostles had reason to be angry and unforgiving of their own Jewish community in Jerusalem. Religious and civil leaders had arrested Jesus and put him to death. The apostles could have been angry, worried, and discouraged. Instead, they managed to stand above this because of a series of nonviolent events. First, Jesus rose from the dead. Then, the disciples received the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Third, Peter and John healed a man crippled from birth. This got the attention of the offending authorities, so Peter took the opportunity to deliver the speech we hear in today’s first reading. He appeals to their common Jewish heritage. He reminds the people that they pressured Pilate to put Jesus to death. They killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. Peter did not incite a riot or threaten to kill the killers. Instead he said, “Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be wiped away.” He gave the killers a second chance. They responded. They came to believe that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, and so they were baptized. The number of people following Christ grew to 5,000. This would not have happened with retaliation. It happened because Peter offered mercy.

Last week Pope Francis declared that next year would be an extraordinary holy year in the Catholic Church on the theme of mercy. Normally, holy years take place every quarter of a century, but several popes have declared one in what you might call the off-season. This one will open on December 8, the 50th anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council. Opening the council, Pope John XXIII said the church intended to use “the medicine of mercy” in place of “the arms of severity.” Pope Francis is hoping that each of us will become special ambassadors next year so that God’s mercy can truly go out to the entire world.

There will be circumstances in which we will all find it hard to show mercy. And there are people who will struggle to show mercy to us. But remember the success that Peter had. You might argue, “But he had Pentecost on his side.” Well, we have confirmation. We have the Holy Spirit who fills us with gifts. The Spirit will enable us to confront those who have hurt us with a message of mercy.

Sunday, April 19, 2015