

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Failure to yield right of way” is how the police officer described my left turn into the flow of traffic. This is an old story. I think it happened in 1976. I was still in school and driving over to visit my parents in south Kansas City. “Your license,” the officer demanded. He shuffled his pen and paper as I handed it over to him. He looked at the license, looked at me, looked at the license again, looked up and said, “Today is your birthday.” I said “Yes.” He handed back my license, tore up the paper, said, “I don’t ticket people on their birthday,” got in his car, and drove away. At the age of 23 I learned that sometimes when people have every reason to punish you for your faults, they give you a break instead.

God acts the same way, according to Psalm 103. Our responsorial today puts onto our lips praise of the Lord who is all-powerful and can treat us however he wishes, but who chooses to be “kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion.”

We sing it on a day when the gospel parable concerns forgiveness and punishment. The very man who is granted forgiveness punishes someone who has sinned less. After doing so, he receives punishment—not for his original offense but for not learning how to forgive. God is forgiving by nature; we are not always so. The Book of Sirach says, “Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight.”

In daily life we spend our anger on people we don’t know and conversely on people we love. We act rudely toward people we don’t know—like drivers who fail to yield the right of way—because we’ll never see them again. We get angry at people we love because they have to put up with us when we misbehave. Anger is practically a virtue in our culture. From social media to talk radio to campaign ads, people make a point not by appealing to reason but by trashing an opponent. Among friends, we laugh at others’ faults as a way of bonding. Especially among men, we think if we score verbal attacks, we enhance our character. Putting down the other guy lowers the bar for how virtuous we need to be. Cleverness outweighs kindness. This culture of anger creeps into family life. Some married couples pass time demeaning their partner when they could engage in friendly conversation. Some parents stressed at work come home and take it out on their kids. Even priests complain about our brothers or our bishops when we could be learning from them. In conversation with those we love we are often guilty of the same traffic violation: failure to yield right of way, failure to give someone the freedom to think what they want and to go where they want. It’s the kind of freedom each of us hopes others would give us.

Psalm 103 says something further about the Lord besides these qualities of compassion. It says, “[The Lord] will not always find fault; nor persist in his anger forever.” The Lord does find fault. The Lord does get angry. When we judge the wrong actions of others, and when we get angry at having been wronged, those are also qualities that this psalm finds in the Lord. The difference is the Lord does not always find fault. The Lord does not persist in anger. The Lord has another way to engage us: compassion. He invites us to treat others the same way. If they’ve done something wrong, name it. But don’t bring it up time and again. Treat the offender with forgiveness. You know, as if it’s their birthday.