Has anyone here ever had one of those days or weeks when everything and everyone was against you? You get cut off in traffic or you’re blamed for something you didn’t do or something petty? Or maybe you were asked to give or do something that seemed extraordinary or was unappreciated by those asking? Or maybe you were nit-picked by others until you just couldn’t take it anymore? Whatever the case, have you ever been pushed to the edge and lashed-out? It seems that we are all challenged by things, people and events in our lives that initiate a response or reaction that we later regret, where the worst in us is released. Sometimes our response may not even be that dramatic or obvious. Sometimes we may not even know we are reacting badly because we no longer recognize it as bad behavior but merely as looking out for number one or as some kind of self-preservation.

I have been challenged in all of these ways recently and so this Gospel has been a real challenge for me and has forced me to take a step back and
really think about what Jesus is saying and what he is asking of me; what he is really asking of all of us. Jesus is asking us to “be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” How is that possible and what does that mean?! To begin with, perfect in this case could also be translated or interpreted to mean “Holy” as we heard in the First Reading from Leviticus or “complete” in faithfulness or “in conformity to the divine ideal” and will. But that doesn’t necessarily make this any easier to attain does it? In this Gospel today which is a continuation of Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount”, Jesus is asking us to go beyond the literal commands of the Law of Moses and to set our sights higher, to dig deeper, and to be better than we are accustomed; in fact He is asking us to be what we were made to be. He is challenging us to be an ideal and a model in and to a world that is constantly tempting us to take the easy road, the road of deception, the road of our own self-interest, the road that leads us to sin and away from “holiness” and “conformity to the divine ideal” and ultimately away from perfection.

Let’s not fool ourselves; this is not an easy task. For all of the reason that I mentioned earlier and countless others, we are constantly challenged to respond to events and people and things AND we are challenged to
respond in a way that is consistent with our Christian and human dignity but we are not always successful. Even though our human nature urges us to protect and preserve ourselves, God calls us to tap into the divine nature that lies within us as well. As Paul reminds us in the Second Reading, we are temples of God and “the Spirit of God dwells in [us]”. We are challenged to go that extra mile or to settle a dispute for the sake of further harm or to love those who oppose us or to turn the other cheek. And this is not easy.

A very powerful example of this is the story of Jackie Robinson and Branch Rickey. As many of you know Jackie Robinson was the first Black baseball player to play in the Major leagues since the 1880’s and broke through the color barrier that existed in sports, in professional baseball and in the United States in the late 1940’s with Rickey’s help and guidance. Branch Rickey was a great baseball pioneer from here in Ohio (as a matter of fact he was a graduate of Ohio Wesleyan) who had already developed the modern farm team system in his career. It was while Rickey was the baseball manager at Ohio Wesleyan that one of his players, an African American, was refused accommodations at a hotel. This infuriated Rickey and he never forgot the incident and vowed to do something about it if he was ever in a position to do so. He is quoted as saying, “I may not be able to
do something about racism in every field, but I can sure do something about it in baseball.” And he did! Jackie was chosen by Rickey, not because he was the best player in the Negro Leagues or the best African American athlete at the time but because Jackie possessed the qualities that Rickey knew would be necessary for success: an ability to put into practice what Jesus is teaching us in this very Gospel today. Both men had very strong Christian faith and Rickey warned Jackie that he would face racism, discrimination and would be hated, ridiculed and the object of abuse by opposing teams and even his own. Jackie had to agree that for the first three years of his career in the Majors he would not fight back or retaliate; he had to turn the other cheek. And he did...for three full seasons!

What is important to see here is that Jesus is not asking us to be idealistic punching bags or to merely lie down for the sake of the Gospel but instead to fight the divine fight with divine Love not retaliation. What I mean by this is that our actions are to be used to reflect the divine ideal or perfection of God in order to draw others to it by seeing how their action are inconsistent with God’s Love. Jackie Robinson performed at a level far above much of his competition and showed THROUGH HIS ACTIONS, not his words, the equality and the dignity of the human person that lay within
each person as part of his or her creation, not the color of their skin! There are others who put this Gospel into action in our modern time also including Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and many others who changed their situations and the world through peaceful, non-violent resistance and charity.

When WE are challenged in our daily lives WE are called to respond to those challenges ACTIVELY. We must choose HOW we will respond. We can either: retaliate, “an eye for an eye”; we can do nothing like a wallflower; or we can respond by acting, or not acting, in a way that conforms us to the “divine ideal” and will. This is what Jesus is teaching us today.

But Jesus doesn’t just teach us this, he shows us. Look at the mural up above the tabernacle. This depiction of Christ crucified is triumphant. Jesus did not succumb to this end because he was defeated but because He willfully gave his life for us and our sins out of divine Love and in conformity with the divine will. His death on the cross is a defiant victory and a gift of Love that the hands of the Father openly accepts.

It is up to us to **act** instead of **react**; to **love** our enemies and not hold a grudge; to **give** with true Charity; to be a temple of God’s Spirit.
Sometimes conforming ourselves to this divine ideal means that when we get cut off in traffic or blamed for something petty or are unappreciated that we are being called to perfection by reflecting the Divine Ideal by our actions and response. We may even be called to turn our cheeks as often as necessary until the hands of our challengers can take no more.