

**May 21, 2017**  
**6th Sunday in Easter Season**

**It is better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil**

*Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you  
for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence.*

**Historical background**

Biblical historian John P. Pilch says, “*In ancient Mediterranean culture, secrecy, lying, and deception were key strategies for protecting one’s honor. The suspicion was always that others were lying. The culture offered strategies for affirming that truth was being told. One was to call God to witness to what one said, thus the prohibition to use God’s name in vain - to witness to a lie. Middle Eastern culture is also agonistic, that is, conflict-prone. Its basic social institution is the large extended family. Everyone outside the family is suspected of being an enemy, plotting evil against the family, seeking to damage it. Truth was owed only to family and kin extending no further than the village. No one outside the village had a right to know anything. This cultural orientation was challenged by Jesus’ teaching to love one another beyond self, family.*”

This cultural value system doesn’t sound very appealing, does it. Yet, it was what Jesus faced in his day. We can only imagine how his listeners took to his teachings: “*Love your enemy. Your neighbor who is a Samaritan (therefore hated) woman*”, and so on. We’re used to hearing these as comforting words.; his listeners must have often been furious at what he was saying, trying to drown him out for preaching such “strange ideas.” He knew what it is like to suffer for doing good rather than doing evil.

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We can agree that living in this way is not easy. We are at times Receptive and Agonistic, and at other times Gentle and Reverent. May Sarton, writing in *Heron Dance*, 2004, describes the gentle and reverent part of ourselves:

*“It does not astonish or make us angry that it takes a whole year to bring into the house three great white peonies and two pale blue iris. It seems altogether right and appropriate that these glories are earned with long patience and faith, and also that it is altogether right and appropriate that they cannot last. We are one of the expressions of nature, just like tree nature, wind nature, and fish nature. In our interaction with nature, we see light and shadow. We see that life is neither benign nor malicious. This fullness evokes our fullness. It evokes story. It evokes yearning. It evokes our ability to see our own pain and shadow reflected in a burn, or a diseased tree, and our own joy in the beauty of the flight of a bird.*”

Meredith Little, also writing in *Heron*, describes the Deceptive and Agonistic part of ourselves:

*“Yet in our human relations we are outraged when the supreme moments, the moments of flowering, must be waited for and then cannot last. We reach a summit, and then have to go down again. Our culture is so problem-oriented. There is so much insidious judgment that goes on with us humans. And there is such a split in us -- the split of the sacred and profane that leads to such disease. When we are in nature, there is something that heals that split, and allows us to embrace both our light and our shadow. And that is healing; that leads to wholeness. If we try to cut away what we think are problems or wrong feelings or inadequate aspects of ourselves or others, we are creating illness.”*

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We are at different times in our lives both of these: Deceptive and Agonistic, and Reverent and Gentle. Let us see at what each of these look like in our culture today:

When speaking out of Reverence and Gentleness, what do I find myself saying about:

- † Muslims
- † Immigrants
- † Political Parties
- † Congress
- † The President
- † Convicts
- † The Church
- † Others

When being Deceptive and Agonistic, what do I find myself saying about:

- † Muslims
- † Immigrants
- † Political Parties
- † Congress
- † The President
- † Convicts
- † The Church
- † Others

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Let us look within ourselves for a moment and ask ourselves:

*“What is it that I hear myself saying that is reverent and gentle that I need to continue,  
and what is it I hear myself saying that is deceptive and agonistic that I need to change?”*