

Today Jesus tells us that his Father infinitely prefers mercy to sacrifice; loving relationships between us and God rather than unloving performance of empty rituals and mechanical application of rules. God wants to be in the middle of the deepest and most active realities of your life and mine. Jesus himself, true God and true man as we saw him in the gospel just now, is the evidence of that.

Our relationship with God is about commitment rather than mere involvement. It's about life itself. The difference is not unlike the difference in the level of engagement we see if we think about an ordinary breakfast of bacon and eggs. The chicken's involved you see, but the pig is committed.

There was a story on ESPN a while ago that might help explain this a bit more. It was about a young lady named Sara Tucholsky, who played softball for Central Washington in the Great Northwest Conference. She was a solid player, but had never hit a home run.

Her team was playing Western Oregon that day in April, the second game of a double-header, and they were behind 2-0. It was the top of the second and two of her teammates were on base. With a 3 and 2 count she saw the most perfect pitch she'd ever seen in her life come her way. She swung at the ball with all her might and sent it sailing over the fence.

Her team erupted with joy, but as they greeted the runners driven home they looked around for Sara and saw that she wasn't rounding the bases. Sara had indeed come around first, but realized she hadn't touched base. She had turned around quickly to do that, but somehow her leg didn't pivot quite right and she had fallen to the ground in terrible pain. She had torn a ligament in her knee and couldn't move.

The coaches rushed to her, but she couldn't even stand up. They asked the ump what could be done but the rules were clear. If she didn't round the bases and touch them all, she would not

have her home run, even though the ball had gone over the fence. Sorry, that was the rule. No mercy. Could they help her around the bases? Nope – if they even touched her, she'd be out. No mercy. So, no home run? Sorry, the rules say you could put in a runner, but it'd only be a double then. No mercy.

Just then something amazing happened. As everyone was talking, the women on the other team learned that this would have been Sara's first home run. It didn't take long for them to realize it would probably also be her last, and they all decided what they would do.

Two of them went up to the ump and asked, "How about if we carry her around the bases?" The ump was stunned – this had never happened before. He checked the rules, but there was no rule about the opposing team doing something like that. It seems that when it comes to mercy, there are no rules.

"You can do that," the ump said. "But if you do, you may lose the game."

They simply asked, "Will her home run count?"

"Yes," the ump said. "It'll count."

He knew, they knew and you have probably already figured out what would happen next.

Mallory Holtman, and her teammate Liz Wallace gently picked up Sara in their arms and carried her around the bases, bending together to lower her so that Sara could touch each base. When they reached home, the three girls looked up, expecting to see people laughing at them and shaking their heads, but that's not what they saw. There wasn't a dry eye in the ballpark, not even the ump's. Mercy and compassion, not the rules, were victorious that day.

You know and I know that all of life's games don't end like that. How the game gets played largely depends on how you and I choose to live; how it is that we choose to form our

conscience; whether we choose to be loving and merciful, or whether we choose a different set of rules.

Bishop Geoffrey Robinson has described six levels of these rules. At any moment, all of us are capable of operating at any of these levels, being merciful or merciless as we choose at the moment to be. Let's check our consciences together now and see if we recognize at which level we spend the bulk of our time.

At the lowest level is the rule of superiority and vengeance. Life is good when I have the upper hand. If you ever do anything to cross me, your destruction will be immediate, painful and complete. This rule permits no exceptions. Mercy and compassion don't figure at all because this rule's all about looking out for number one. Don't ask me to help you with your home run.

The next level is the rule of justice without mercy. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Bishop Robinson was reminded of the "chilling phrase... 'don't get mad; get even.'" The only improvement here is that unrestricted vengeance has been tempered by some notion of proportionality. Love and mercy still don't figure. No help with home runs here, either.

Next is the level of utilitarianism, which is a rule inspired by your usefulness to me. If you're good for anything I want or need, then I will likely not harm you. If I see no use for you, I am at liberty to ignore you, push you out of my way and even destroy you. Any notion of love here is purely self-centered, as in the preceding two levels of moral behavior. Mercy and compassion don't play at all. I'll help you with your home run if there's something in it for me.

The next level is the level of the Ten Commandments, which demand respect for life, express the attitudes and relationships with God and each other that make life worth living, enforce proper use of material goods and uphold the value of your good name and mine. At this level, I might not help you with your home run, but at least I won't get in your way.

The next level is the level of loving others as we love ourselves. At this level, we not only constrain our behavior to do each other no harm, but we actively seek to optimize each others' well-being. I will treat you as I would treat myself, and I know that you will do likewise for me, simply because we both know it's the right thing to do. It's not just about following a rule, but rather about choosing to be good; doing what we do with compassion and love, simply because we know it's good.

This is what the young women in central Washington did last April. The beauty of their story lies in the mercy and love that everyone could see in what they did – there was nothing superficial or self-serving. Think you'd like to play on a team like theirs? Guess what – you do.

But there's one final level, Bishop Robinson tells us. The last level is to love one another the way God loves us. That means I would willingly give up my life for you whether you would do likewise for me or not. Of course, I wouldn't necessarily need to die for you, in fact, what's meant is precisely the opposite.

You see, what really matters to me that you have life to the full. I will happily spend myself on your behalf. Whether you would or not for me is your choice. There are, after all, six levels of moral choice, each with its own set of rules and outcomes. As I see it, my life's for your nourishment, just an itchy-bitsy reflection of the way I know that the life of Jesus is nourishment for us all.

It's the most perfect pitch I've ever seen in my life, and I'm going to swing at it with all my might. All I'd ask is that if you see me fall, help me around the bases, would you? I really can't do it without you.