

7 Epiphany
Luke 6:27-38 | Genesis 45:3-11, 15
February 24th, 2019
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Jesus said, "I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

"Love your enemies," Jesus says to those who listen.

If we don't listen – really deeply listen – to the entire life and teaching of Jesus, this Gospel reading may be one of the most dangerous in Christian history. Dangerous or uncharacteristically naïve.

Luke's Jesus has come down from the mountaintop where he prayed all night to open his awareness to God's yearning. Jesus and the 12 people he chose to be eyewitnesses to God's renewal of Israel have come to a crowd gathered at a level place. And here, Jesus is about midway through laying out his vision for his followers as God's renewal emerges.

To those who hate you or curse you, who abuse you, strike you or who steal from you, Jesus says: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." And in the context of this "sermon on the plain," the implication is: "...and *keep* doing to others as you would have them do to you *no matter what they do to you.*" Don't judge, don't condemn. Forgive, be forgiven and give.

Jesus knew the story of Joseph's emotional reunion with his family after their brutal betrayal. All but one of his jealous half-brothers plotted to kill him, but one brother talked them into tossing him into an empty well instead. And while he was imprisoned, the half-brothers sold Joseph to a caravan heading for Egypt.

Eventually, Joseph was sold to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard, until Potiphar threw Joseph in prison for a crime he did not commit. He suffered in prison for years until an ex-convict working in the pharaoh's court

remembered that Joseph could interpret dreams. After Joseph successfully predicted good fortune for the pharaoh, he became Vizier, the highest official serving the pharaoh.

In the part of the story we heard this morning, a weeping Joseph is reunited with Jacob, his father, (also called “Israel”) and his half-brothers and full-blood brother. Joseph will go on to save the entire house of Jacob from starvation and bring them all to Egypt to live in relative security.

Jesus was also surely influenced by Rabbi Hillel, a prominent scholar in Jerusalem during Herod’s reign. A Gentile sceptic once challenged Hillel to summarize all Jewish teaching while the man stood on one foot. “What is hateful to you,” Hillel said, “do not do to anyone else. All the rest is commentary. Go and learn.”

These Jewish anecdotes provide essential context for the reading from Luke. What Jesus is promoting is a love that is larger than “do to others before they do to you” or even “so *that* they do to you.” Jesus is pointing out a love that goes beyond all human expressions of love to a love that is Godly.

And this is where Christians often slip off the rails.

Christian missionaries have rationalized taking non-Christian children from their homes or prohibiting the practice of indigenous religions or even speaking their own languages because, they told themselves, “We will not allow them to be pagans because we would not want to be pagans.”

We have used these teachings to pressure people into suffering in silence. Even well-intentioned Christians have told women, people of color, non-heterosexual people, people in abusive relationships and vulnerable people in other situations that Jesus expects them to forgive and *forget*. Let the past be in the past. We have misinterpreted these readings to insist that vulnerable people in abusive situations should suffer because of the inherent virtue in their suffering. People have died as a consequence.

Now, I notice that it’s easier for people with power or privilege to say that God has a redeeming purpose for someone else’s pain. And we could spend all day trying to parse that out and get nowhere. White people can too easily dismiss systemic racism because they don’t call people names. Not the point.

People who roll their eyes at the #metoo movement because “boys will be boys” shrug off real pain. Straight people can ignore homophobia because they think that being gay is a life-style. That there are gay people born in Somalia, Syria and Sudan where homosexuality is punishable by death might be an argument worth noticing.

In the current climate in this country, we are increasingly preoccupied with defending our perspectives at the cost of listening to each other, especially when other people are affected by our misbehavior or saddled with systemic injustice. We can become distracted trying to name who's good and who's bad. In truth, we are all some mix of both depending on the situation.

There is a simpler, more life-affirming alternative: "Don't judge, don't condemn. Forgive, be forgiven and give." That's good news for all of us, especially when we become occasional cheek-slappers or unintentional abusers or inadvertent thieves.

"Love your enemies," Jesus says to *all those* who listen. Hear this as a way to make another crack in the world's defenses to let in just a little more light. Judging each other or condemning each other is not the way that life will be in the fullness of God's in-breaking realm. As "children of the Most High," we can model in the world around us the love that God has for all of creation. We can act as though God's in-breaking heaven is here!

Practicing God's forgiving and self-emptying love is not denying the pain that we carry or that we have caused. Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who helped set up and chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, said this: "I can say unequivocally that forgiving does not mean *forgetting* the harm. It does not mean denying the harm. It does not mean pretending the harm did not happen or the injury was not as bad as it really was. Quite the opposite is true. The cycle of forgiveness can be activated and completed only in absolute truth and honesty.

"Forgiving," Tutu went on, "requires giving voice to the violations and naming the pains we have suffered. Forgiving does not require that we carry our suffering in silence or be martyrs on a cross of lies. Forgiveness does not mean that we pretend things are anything other than they are."

Practicing God's forgiving and self-emptying love does not rely on our own human capacity. We aspire to love with *God's* love.

The 14th century English monk and mystic Walter Hilton said it this way: "As for your enemies, and others who are clearly not in a state of grace, you must love them too, not for what they are, nor as if they were good and holy, for they are not; but you must love them *for God's* sake, hoping that they will become good and holy."

Practicing God's forgiving and self-emptying love is not a one-way transaction. When we forgive, we liberate ourselves from the grip of wrongs done and we also liberate the person we are forgiving to grow, change and

mature. It can be hard to see hurtful people in the light of their own humanity unless we can recall our own hurtfulness.

As we experience asking for forgiveness, taking responsibility and making amends appropriately, we learn to respond to the gift of forgiveness with an attitude of forgiveness toward others. Practicing as children of the Most High, we become increasingly like God, our Father. And the character of God, who is kind to the “ungrateful and the wicked,” dictates that we practice love that is not limited by others' responses to us.

A non-judgmental, forgiving and giving spirit begins to shine through our actions, our words and our perspectives to reveal our awareness of the grace of God that changes people. Our lives become evidence that we have been forgiven and have chosen to respond to that forgiveness by opening ourselves to new possibilities for seeing each other as God see us.

We will never be capable of fully returning to God the love, compassion and generosity that God pours out for us. Our *role and reward* is to embody the love of God that moves us to treat the people around us with fairness in a world discouraged by injustice. God's outpouring allows us to speak, listen and act with generosity in a culture of self-centeredness. Through us, the love of God inspires gratitude where ignorance and greed are idolized. In a society that seems bent on retribution, God's compassion can join mercy with justice by way of our actions.

“Love your enemies,” Jesus says to those who listen. And if we truly listen to what Jesus offers, we hear an invitation to a different approach to life: “Judge not, and you shall not be judged. And condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Release, and you shall be released.”

If we consent to follow the example of Jesus, our brother, in becoming blessings to creation, as a more poetic rendering of Luke's Greek reads: “Give, and it shall be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, shall they give you in your bosom. For with what measure you measure, it shall be measured to you again.”

This distinct way of being sets us apart from our surrounding culture, *not* because we are superior. We are set apart so that we can be free to rely entirely on the ever-flowing life and love of God. And the more we live as though we truly trust that love, the more God's presence flows through us, the children of God, who are given to the world to be fountains of grace.

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