

Among Friends and Enemies
Preached by
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For Reflection: *"The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people."* G.K. Chesterton

Hebrew Scripture Reading: Genesis 45:3-11, 15

Both of our scripture readings today are from the lectionary's recommended text. Our first is a cutting from near the very end of the story of Joseph –his reconciliation with his brothers and the family's emigration from Israel into Egypt.

Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for your many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Gospel Reading: Luke 6:27-38

Our second suggested reading comes from the gospel of Luke and is actually two of Jesus' teaching – as though just one wouldn't give us enough to chew on. Let us listen together.

But 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.'

Sermon: Among Friends and Enemies

"Love your enemies," and what follows may be one of the most used and abused sayings of Jesus. It has been used to suggest to people who are abused that submission in this life will be rewarded in another one. It has been used to suggest that maintaining boundaries and expecting respect are not the "Christian" way, but rather that Christians are to be doormats for anyone who would take advantage of them – again, often with some suggestion of a reward in some other life.

Alternatively, those words have been slapped across every kind of conflict in ways that allow us to blithely announce we love our enemies, friends or family members who have disappointed us, while affirming that we do not condone whatever behaviors have led to this point. The problem with that is

that we bestow this love as though it were some kind of Christian largesse that requires no change in our own behaviors, words or actions. The problem is that we often set ourselves up as benevolent judges just waiting for someone to beg forgiveness. In such ways, we announce that we have already judged them and found them wanting. If I may be so bold, ladies and gentlemen, that is not our throne to occupy.

Our first mistake in understanding that text is to assume that "love" is a warm fuzzy feeling, rather than a way of regarding and treating other human beings. A second mistake is to assume that love does not hold people accountable for behaviors that rend the fabric of human life. A third mistake is to assume that enemies are some easily identified persons or groups of persons—military or political enemies as it were—rather than also including those who have hurt us or made us angry—those to whom we might be related by blood or marriage, with whom we might be co-workers or fellow students or neighbors.

Loving people at such times is hard even when we are not trying to generate some emotion defined by bad poetry in greeting cards. This Biblical love calls for always regarding the other as human. We are not to reduce them to something less than human—a stereotype or a member of a group we disapprove of or despise, or simply someone who does not have the same human needs and limitations we are willing to excuse in ourselves. If we take nothing else from this text, let us take with us the charge that we are always to treat others with the human dignity to which they are entitled by virtue of their creation by God.

A Biblical love calls for not demonizing those we would call enemies – either temporarily or permanently. We are not to define them as totally evil or incapable of good. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once warned that things would be easy if people could be so easily categorized, but reminded us that the line between good and evil cuts through every human heart.

Once we've held ourselves accountable to those mandates of our faith in regard to those who have hurt or wounded us or others, then we can begin to choose responsive actions.

Today, we will look to our story from Joseph's life for one approach. It is one of the most remarkable a stories of reconciliation we have.

Joseph's brothers have encountered him in his new position as advisor to Pharaoh before, but did not recognize him. Now they do. They do not ask for forgiveness because they are struck dumb, most likely with terror. Both Joseph and his brothers realize that Joseph has all the power.

Joseph had all the power and he had a choice. He could have had his brothers killed or imprisoned or sold into slavery as they did to him with just a word. It must have been tempting as it would be to any of us. Or Joseph could do a new thing and change the tenor of the relationship for all time.

Joseph did not stand waiting imperiously for his brothers to beg for forgiveness. He made the first move. He began by acknowledging what his brothers had done to him –there was no sweeping the past under the rug. Unnamed, those deeds would have remained a toxic element forever festering under the surface of whatever renewed relationship they might have developed.

As many of us do, Joseph made sense of what had happened to him by seeking to discern God's purposes and presence in his life. He shared that understanding with his brothers. If we have questions about a God who works in such ways, obviously working for the long-term at the short-term expense of few humans, we'd do well to remember it was Joseph's understanding, not necessarily a pronouncement of the Lord. (And, if I may be permitted a commercial, for a fuller discussion of that, be part of the Wednesday Women's Bible Study in Lent☺.)

Then Joseph pointed out what they already knew. As a result of their unkindness, he had come to be in a place where he possessed everything they needed for survival. He could have withheld it – and perhaps that is what they were expecting and we would certainly understand.

Yet, there was a deeper wisdom in Joseph. He knew that he and they needed relationship – a healing of the breach between them. He knew that with the healing and relationship there would be the potential for greater strength and fullness of life than mere food could supply.

He offered them food, and life together, kissed them and wept upon them—no doubt in grief for all that had gone before and all that they had missed in one another's lives. And then they talked. It's sort of a shame Scripture doesn't tell us about that conversation. I suspect it lasted for hours and included confession and forgiveness and catching up on what had happened in their lives and the names of children and in-laws and all the gathered clan. What was to develop from that first act of reconciliation would be the growth of the twelve tribes of Israel and the founding of a people because one man made the first move toward reconciliation.

Faith's history and the world's history is full of stories of reconciliation not attempted, of feuds that last for generations, of nations permanently bristling at one another, of empty chairs at holiday tables because of harsh words once spoken. Perhaps we would do well to remember one story of a different way and a very different outcome. Perhaps we would do well to remember that unlike Joseph, while we rarely have all the power, we always have the power to choose how we regard other human beings, how we hold people accountable in Biblical love and whether or not we make the first move toward reconciliation. History shows we have the power to change our lives, the power to change our

communities and the power to change the world by virtue of the choices we make. So let us make choices informed by our faith.

Prayers for Others, and Ourselves

Most holy and compassionate God: Each day and each week, we are changed by the lives we live. We bear the marks of our hurts and joys, rejoicing and grieving, illness and health, successes and failures, disappointments and satisfactions. Things we never dared hope for and things we dread in the night, they happen so quickly. We look in the mirror and find ourselves marked and scarred by events out of our control.

As we gather together in prayer, let us remember that you have marked us as yours, and through your Spirit we have the power to change the lives we live. We may not be able to control events, but with your help we can choose how we respond to them. Each day, whether the events of the day bring us joy or sorrow or both, help us to know that you are with us, caring for us, holding us, calling us to new life in Christ. Remind us that your will for us is wholeness, not brokenness. Give us the strength and endurance to move toward you and to give thanks for your care in all things.

All this we ask as members of the body of your Son, who taught us when together to pray...

The Lord's Prayer

