

St. Paul's Congregational Church
 February 24, 2019, Epiphany 7C
 Change of Heart
 Genesis 45: 3-11, 15; Luke 6:27-38

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

We come to the Joseph story late here in Genesis – Joseph and his coat of many colors is a story we probably all remember from childhood. Now here we are – as Joseph meets his brothers for the first time after so many years, with all that's happened, we have to wonder how Joseph really felt. He'd been thrown into a pit by his brothers and left to die. Then he was pulled out and sold into slavery, taken to Egypt, then put in prison on a charge of, well, misconduct with Potiphar's wife – he was released from prison though, because Pharaoh was impressed with his dream interpretations. When famine hit, pharaoh put him in charge of the entire welfare system. Now, here he stands in front of his very own brothers who have come seeking food – in front of those brothers who don't recognize him as that pesky baby brother they sent away. How would we feel facing them in those circumstances?

Joseph's response may not be what we'd expected. Our reading shows Joseph as an example of God's love spilling over and pouring out. Isn't that a powerful image? Spilling over and pouring out. Just imagine a love so fulfilling, so overflowing, that it has nowhere else to go but to bubble over and pour out onto others. God's love for Israel brings preservation of life: a great deliverance for all of God's people. The God-like love Joseph demonstrates for his brothers is **forgiveness**.

Then we move to the gospel reading: Luke's passage is a how-to manual for God-like loving. It's one of those passages we need to read over and over again – Luke challenges us and it certainly is a challenge if we are honest with ourselves. It's a challenge to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us. It's a challenge not to judge. It's a challenge to forgive. It's a challenge to give and keep giving. What does it mean for us to live and love God-like?

Maybe someone with a closet full of clothes could give up a coat much more easily than the homeless person who has only one. Maybe those financially blessed have no difficulty giving, but for young families, husband or wife out of work, a single mom on welfare, families paying hefty college tuitions – giving may be difficult. So it's hard for us to know what is

God-like. For each of us it may be different. Each of us may have a different challenge.

Agape love is hard. Agape love is selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love – the highest of the four types of love in the Bible, sometimes known as charitable love – doing good for others without condition, without expectation of return. .And I know sometimes we can wonder, is it worthwhile to do good? Is it worthwhile to do good in the face of so much wrong? How many of us would teach our children to turn the other cheek to the school yard bully? How does the idea of praying for our enemies compute in our world today, so full of gun violence, war, hateful rhetoric, drug abuse, racism, corruption – you may think of other things to add to this list.

Jesus’ answer to all these questions is straight forward and direct and crystal clear. His words stand in stark contrast to the values of our world:

Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who will abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other also. If someone takes away your coat, give them your shirt too.

This is so radical, isn’t it – in Jesus’ time and in ours too. But from the very beginning of his appearance on the religious scene, Jesus directly challenged the accepted thinking of his day – and continues to challenge us today. The good news he was sent to proclaim is “good news to the poor” – those who have been forgotten will be remembered, and those who have been oppressed will be liberated. Healing and hope are extended to all who have previously been rejected. Heroes in the realm of God will be servants of all – and heroes will be those who stand firm in their trust in God even when, especially when, things seem hopeless. In the realm of God, Jesus proclaims, the hungry will be fed, the humble lifted up, and the powerless will reign with God.

The question remains for us, screams to us, “is it possible to live according to these radical teachings of Jesus in this world?” At some time or another, though, most of us will experience an uneasiness with these teachings. We trust Christ as Lord and we want to believe that we are a part of those who are called followers of Christ. Yet, the truth is, we have a lot of trouble with some of these issues like, “turning the other cheek” because to do otherwise would subject us, and perhaps worse, our children to increasing mistreatment.

But we know that in spite of the “might makes right” and “attack before someone attacks me” thinking of our world, there are people who actually put Jesus’ principles to work. They discover the power of doing

good and resisting retaliation and they have changed the world! I think of Martin Luther King, Jr. I think of Gandhi. Through nonviolent action and seeking the best for all persons, friends and enemies alike, both of these men brought about change which could never have been brought about by brute force. And we continue to need that change today so badly – agape love, compassion, forgiveness seem to be in short supply – but that’s what Jesus wants from us – if we’re to call ourselves disciples, we have to work on this. We can do this!

For Gandhi, the quest was to discover inner peace for all persons - not just for himself. One of his favorite stories was the story of a king who sought inner peace:

An ancient Indian King was obsessed with the desire to find the meaning of peace - what is it, how can we get it, and when we find it, what should we do with it. Intellectuals in his kingdom were invited to answer the King’s question for a handsome reward, and many tried. None could explain how to find peace and what to do with it. At last someone sent the King to a sage who lived just outside the borders of the kingdom and told him. “He is an old man and very wise. If anyone can answer your questions, he can”.

So the King went to the sage and asked the question – what is the meaning of peace? Without a word the sage went into the kitchen and brought a grain of wheat to the king. “In this you will find the answer to your question,” the sage said as he placed the grain of wheat into the king’s hand.

The king clutched the grain of wheat and returned to his palace. He locked the grain into a tiny gold box and placed the box in his safe. Each morning, the King would open the box, look at the grain to seek an answer, but could find nothing.

Weeks later, another sage passing through, stopped to meet the king who asked his help in solving his dilemma. The king explained what had happened - that the sage gave him a grain of wheat. “I have been looking for an answer every morning, but I find nothing.” the king said.

The sage said, “It is quite simple - just as this grain represents nourishment for the body, peace represents nourishment for the soul. If you keep this grain locked up in a gold box it will eventually perish without providing nourishment or multiplying. However, if it is allowed to interact with the elements - light, water, air, soil - it will flourish, multiply and soon you will have a whole field of wheat which will nourish not only you but so many others. This is the meaning of peace. It must nourish your soul and the souls of others, it must multiply by interacting with the elements.”

Friends, living in today's world is hard – in so many ways. But we have found some answers, haven't we. We who have experienced God's love, God's peace, for even a moment, know that there's a better way. It's a good time to be church – to be counter cultural in the way we treat each other, in the way we care for each other, in the way we speak up in the face of wrong, in the way we walk in this world – to understand that there is always hope, to understand that we will get the strength to live as Jesus calls us. We need to be clear, though, about three things:

1. The call of Christ: if we are to embrace the power of doing good and have any chance to live out the challenge of Christ, we need to open our lives up to Christ's call to us. In our baptism, we are marked for Christ forever. And as adult Christians, we need to affirm or reaffirm this call as a full time, everyday, sunup to sundown call. Christianity is not a part time religion or a Sunday exercise or a spectator sport, but a way to live – all the time.

2. Our commitment to Christ: it may be in the call of Christ to love our enemies, and to pray for our abusers that we become most aware of our need to continually renew our commitment to Christ. We can't do this on our own - there is no way to live this life without the intervening work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Honestly, where I get stuck is in forgiving - forgiving the past, forgiving myself, forgiving others. There's no way I can live the instruction: forgive and you will be forgiven – I can't do it without the Spirit in my life. The only way we can even begin to live according to the teachings of Christ is to revisit and renew our commitment to Christ. Where is it that you get stuck?

And 3: the community of Christ. Again, we cannot do all this alone. The disciples who undertook the mission of Christ in those earliest days would not have been given a chance of success by any self respecting management consultants. Love your enemies in their world? In this world? Absurd. Unless. Unless Jesus was actually with them as promised. Unless Jesus is actually with us as promised. Jesus Christ has promised his presence with his church until the job is done. We are called to be joined in a community where mutual encouragement and the strength of the Holy Spirit makes us able to embrace and live out the power of doing good! We are all part of the body of Christ by our baptism: it's a good time to be part of the church! We need each other now more than ever.

A story:

In a little town in central Europe, Jacob the tailor felt he had been mistreated in the church. And so he withdrew from the community and isolated himself from his friends and neighbors. Weeks went by and the

priest visited him. After a polite greeting there was a heavy silence. Then the priest said, "Let's sit in front of the fire."

So the two men sat in complete silence. An hour or so later, the priest picked up the fireplace tongs, pulled out a coal, and set it on the hearth, away from the fire. Still no word was spoken. The two men just sat and watched the glowing, burning piece of coal become darker and darker, until finally it was black and cold and dusty with ashes. A few moments later, Jacob the tailor spoke. "I understand," he said. "I'll come back to church."

Not a word had been spoken, but the point was made. We withdraw from the community, we isolate ourselves from our neighbor, and we die. We need one another.

Jesus puts out some absolutely impossible tasks for his followers - love your enemies; do good to those who hate you, pray for your abusers; when someone hits you, turn the other cheek.

Impossible for mere mortals, that is. But there's the promise of reward too: those who live out the values of God's kingdom will receive back everything they give - and more. And every once in a while we get a glimpse into that glory, into that kingdom of mutual sharing. And that gives us strength to carry on.

A seminary student went home during Christmas break - his father was a pastor of a parish in the inner city, lived in the neighborhood, and spent every day wrestling with the problems of poverty, unemployment, hunger, inadequate housing. One cold afternoon they went for a walk - as they walked the neighborhood of sad streets, weed infested park, they talked about the mission of the church and the challenge of living out one's faith in such harsh circumstances. As they neared the end of their walk, they realized they were hungry and decided to stop at a pay phone to order pizza which would be delivered by the time they returned home.

As they headed for the phone, a homeless man approached them. "Spare change?" he asked.

The father reached into his pockets and pulled out two handfuls of coins, held them out, and said, "Take what you need." The astonished man looked at all the coins and said, "I'll take it all." He raked the money from the father's hands into his own.

Father and son resumed their walk to the pay phone, but passed only a few steps before the father realized he'd given away all his coins - there was no money for the phone call. So he turned around and called to the homeless man, "Pardon me, I need to make a phone call. Can you spare some change?"

The homeless man turned around and held out his hands, now full of coins. “Here. Take what you need.”

A rare moment of mutual sharing. Impossible? With mortals, yes. But with God... nothing is impossible.

So may it be for us. Amen.