

Year C, Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany
February 20, 2022
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“...for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.”

This is one of those good news/bad news lessons. Our readings from Genesis, the psalms and St. Luke’s gospel are all about enemies, how we, as people of faith (people trying to be faithful) deal with enemies. Enemies... People who hate you, who don’t have your best interest in mind, maybe are actively working against your interest, trying to cause harm to you... Antagonists come in many forms, some sinister and life-threatening, some merely annoying and everything in between. G.K. Chesterton in a 1910 newspaper article wrote, “The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because generally they are the **same** people.”

That enemies exist in the world, that relationships between enemies cause so much damage, that we have them in our own lives, some known to us, some not – that is bad, bad news. Original sin sort of bad news. Why does it have to be like that why? Why *can’t* we just get along? And then the really bad news is that we are actually expected to do all of the things Jesus is telling us to do: love our enemies, bless those who curse us, all of that. Can you imagine? OK, it is not actually bad news (well the fact that enemies exist as a category of human experience is bad news), but the expectation that we love them is Gospel, the original Good News, it is The Way of Jesus Christ. So this is good, but horribly challenging and resentment-inducing news to be sure. We must love our enemies.

That is how I usually read the Sermon on the Plain and its more famous version, the Sermon on the Mount, found in Sts. Mark and Matthew’s gospels. I usually read it like I’m the one who needs to do some loving on my enemies. I have some forgiving to do, some mercy to dispense, some hard, hard, impossibly hard work to do reconciling myself to those who have wronged me, would wrong me if they could. (I have a list).

But you know what, the enemy relationship is a two way street. As much as someone is our enemy, so you are someone’s enemy. We need to be forgiven for our trespasses as much as we need to forgive anyone else. We need mercy for what we have done as much as we need to offer mercy. Sometimes we are the one striking the cheek rather than the one instructed to righteously offer the other. That is not in every relationship. In some relationships we are the wronged, the abused, the hurt: end of story. In others, we are the transgressor. In some relationships it is both, we have transgressed and been transgressed against. The Good News in all of this? “...for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” So, “Be merciful, just as your

Father in merciful.” We, you are forgivable. We, you are loveable, are worthy of God’s mercy. Good News, everyone!

So the Good News is that we can love, forgive, and be merciful to our enemies. That’s good. And... we can be loved, be forgiven and be given mercy by those whom we have harmed. That is also good news, but man alive, talk about complicated. Loving anyone is hard, loving someone who has done or would do harm to you if they could??? Or to have to face someone whom you have done wrong??? Well, thanks be to God, there is another bit of Good News in this teaching of Jesus, and that regards the nature of the love we offer to our enemies. The love we are exhorted to give is not sentimental love, not feeling-centered, affectionate self-centered love, all the ways erotic and filial love manifest, not that, but big love, agapic love, God-love. And that is completely different.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King parses this out in his sermon “The Strength to Love.” He tells us that we should be glad that Jesus did not say “like your enemy,” and I quote the good Reverend Dr. “because some people are impossible to like.” How do we like someone who is trying to, I don’t know, fire bomb your house and kill your family? Vilify you in the court of public opinion? Oppress you and your people, denying you basic rights? King was never going to invite Bull Connor to his house for dinner. But surely he would have invited him to church. Offered him the Good News of Jesus Christ, His broken Body and Blood (if it was communion Sunday), offered him the blessings of God in all good faith, offered him care if he needed it, shelter and food. Agapè love, God-love isn’t Cupid’s arrows and tender, affectionate sentiment, it is the light of Christ shining in the darkness, leading you (and, God-willing them) to the promised land.

But how do we even begin to approach this question? How do we actually love our enemies? It is like the path to Carnegie Hall: Practice, Practice, Practice. You can do it. You likely can’t do it right now, we’ve all got some work to do in this regard, but love, as we all know, almost always takes time to develop. Our knowledge of the other, of ourself in relation to that other, understanding the feelings others bring out in us, understanding the misunderstandings that led to becoming enemies, the hurt, the trauma they (or you) caused. It takes time. Rome didn’t fall in a day. So don’t dismiss this vital practice because it looks impossible from where you are sitting right now. It may be impossible where you are sitting right now... so be patient and forgiving of yourself as you move forward. (And forward we must go).

Some enemies are dangerous, they threaten our well-being or even our lives. And all of this forgiving and loving enemies doesn’t in any way imply that you forget the hurts and the harms done or being done. Loving your enemy is not a call to martyrdom. But it can mean loving someone because in loving them you are saving yourself. But how do we even begin?

Three of our readings today give very distinct strategies for dealing with enemies.

First, in Genesis, we hear the story of Joseph, the youngest, most favored son of Jacob. You know the story: his brothers were jealous of their youngest brother in his Coat of Many Colors, so they rid themselves of him by selling him into slavery in Egypt. Fast forward some years and on the strength of his prophetic voice, Joseph rises to a position of great power under Pharaoh. Then a famine strikes, and Jacob's sons go to Egypt seeking grain. Unwittingly they go to Joseph for help. Whoops. Maybe they shouldn't have sold him into slavery...

But no, Joseph embraces them. Well he messes with them a little first, but very quickly he turns it around and he very genuinely loves them. How? Brothers selling brothers into slavery... it doesn't get much worse than that. What mechanism allowed him to embrace the people who betrayed him so profoundly? How does Joseph get to loving them again? He forgives them.

He forgives them because his understanding is that God was behind it all, that God led him to Egypt in order that he might be able to provide for his family. That is dubious theology – God creating disasters as object lessons to the faithful. That doesn't make a lot of sense to me. But the point is not Joseph's path to Egypt, but in what he does with it. And what he does is forgive them.

Forgive: to stop feeling angry or resentful toward someone for an offense, flaw, or mistake; to cancel a debt. That is certainly about the forgiver more than the forgiven, isn't it? Someone offended... that is over, in the past. (You can't forgive someone who continues to offend. Loving your enemy doesn't mean you need to continue to deal with their abuse).

Do you know the story of the two monks? There was an older one and a younger one, and as they walked through a town, a rich woman stopped them and demanded that they carry her and her bags over a puddle. The older monk does, and when he put her down she rudely walked away, not even saying "thank you," let alone putting anything in their alms bowl.

The monks continued on their journey, but the younger monk kept going over the scene, over and over again and he got angrier and angrier at the rudeness and entitlement of that woman. "I can't believe she did that!" He eventually exclaimed, breaking their silence. The older monk paused, turned to the younger and said, "Hmmm... I put her down hours ago." Forgive. Put the offense aside, let go of YOUR feelings about it because they are yours to let go of. That is a big barrier to loving your enemy melting away. So one strategy is to follow Joseph and forgive. How does that sound?

If that is too much, the psalmist has another, "Do not fret yourself because of evildoers; do not be jealous of those who do wrong... Refrain from anger, leave rage alone; do not fret yourself; it leads only to evil." Don't worry, is the message. Don't dwell on the actions of others. Ignore what *they* are up to, and

concern yourself with God, because as Jesus says, “The Lord will help them and rescue them; he will rescue them from the wicked and deliver them.” Ignore not the act so much, as the feelings that the act brings up.

We’ve all used this with kids, right? “Well just pay them no attention,” when one sibling is doing something not harmful perhaps, but lame beyond 12-year-old’s reckoning ability. (“It’s *my* window. They can’t look out of it.” You’ve been there). Now this strategy, ignoring the evil doer, not engaging with feelings over the success of a cheater, a smarmy businessman, a scoundrel, that isn’t appropriate for when great evil is happening. We ought not ignore those who, say, stormed the capital last year. (But we also mustn’t hunt them down with extreme prejudice and make them pay, either). Don’t envy them their ill-gotten gains. Don’t dwell on the contents of their hearts and how much rain falls on their heads as opposed to the righteous in a parched land. That is a second strategy, ignore the turmoil that the enemy does.

Then we get to Jesus, and Jesus is always the highest road, the smallest gate, the narrowest path. And what is Jesus’ way? “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.” Got it? And how? Well Jesus lays out some practices... someone hits you? Offer your other cheek. “I am under your power.” Someone steals from you? Be sure to offer them more than they take. Give to everyone who begs. “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

These are all forms of being merciful. Mercy – compassion or forgiveness shown to someone whom it is within our power to punish or harm. Again, this is about us, much more about our relationship to God and to the evil doer and much less about the evil actions and the evildoer themselves. This is some extraordinarily advanced spiritual activity here. Don’t judge yourself by your inability to do this, or to even consider doing anything like this, especially towards someone who has really hurt you, really has it out for you. But it is possible.

Dorothy Day is one of my spiritual heroes. Co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, her whole project in life was to live in accordance to the teachings right here, the Sermon on the Plain, the Sermon on the Mount. Loving others as you would have them love you. And she started it in the slums and tenements, the jails and courtrooms of the Bowery and the Lower East Side. (Not the Manhattan of today).

She and her fellow Catholic Workers did amazing works of mercy, did amazing works of forgiveness and grace in the name of Jesus Christ. There is one story though that really sums it up for me, this kind of loving your enemy and blessing those who curse you. At one point in the 1940s, a farm in Easton, Pennsylvania was given to Day and friends. A bunch of them, Dorothy and co-founder Peter Maurin included, moved out to the country to begin the next phase of their journey with the least of these, the

Agronomic University – a Catholic worker farm. It is a long story, but what in effect happened was that a group of people split off from the Workers and occupied the property. They in effect, stole the farm.

What did Day and Maurin and friends do? Did they force the other out physically? No. Legally? Did they retain counsel? (They had the deed, their claim was iron clad). No, they walked away. They saw nothing but heartache before them if they entered into conflict, nothing but opportunities for hatred and strife, jealousy and ill will. That had already happened. Nothing was going to change that, not even victory over the evil doers, so they prayed and they left. Can you imagine? Can you imagine how much harder it was to do that than to follow the conventional path of lawyering up or calling the sheriff? How do you get to that point?

Knowing the nature of God in Christ is the starting point. Knowing yourself and what you need and why, helps. A lot. And aligning and realigning and realigning again with the world of God. It is right there in the text, how to do this. “Bless those who curse you, pray for those that abuse you.” It is hard to hate someone you are praying actively for. At least it is hard to hate them for long if you really keep at it. Hold them up to the light of Christ and see them in that new light. Imagine that their face is the face of Jesus, because it is. Lend expecting nothing in return. That is it. It is all about expectations. We have immense power over our own expectations. And if we have a handle on our expectations, we won't be jealous, we won't be angry, we won't be hateful or violent if we engage others in our hearts. Do this, practice this by not judging, not condemning, forgiving, giving.

It is tough out there, life, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” is how the Reverend Mr. Hobbes put it. But it is not a new arrangement of power that is the answer, this is deeper than a social contract can address, this is human nature. In Jesus Christ we are offered a way, the Way to transcend our own nature and take on the nature of the divine. And that way is Love. AMEN