

Sermon: Luke 6:27-38; Gen 45
"The Courage to Have Mercy"

© Kate Heichler; Preached at Christ Church Wayside
7 Epiphany, Year C; Sunday, February 23, 2025

Let us pray: God, make these words Your word, and our hearts your heart. Amen.

When did mercy get so controversial? That's what our bishop asked of our president at the inauguration prayer service – that he be merciful to people who were vulnerable. For that she got death threats and needed hired security. *"Be merciful, just as your heavenly father is merciful,"* Jesus told his followers. But mercy is where they were to start – he asked much more of them, and us: *"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."*

Let people steal from us? Really? Let people hurt us? A friend wrote this week about a children's book she'd once read, in which a thief breaking into a house is greeted by the homeowner asking what else he might need, since he must surely be in dire circumstances to have to resort to robbery... what an idea! And forgive even those who wound you to the core? How do we do that?

Well, we might look at Joseph our first reading today, the eleventh and favorite son of the patriarch Jacob; the great-grandson of Abraham himself. We only heard the tail end of the story, and what a story it is; eight chapters long. Joseph is given to having dramatic dreams, which have a way of coming true. His older brothers, already jealous because their father loves Joseph so much, are further incensed by a few of these dreams that suggest one day Joseph will be in charge, and they will be bowing down to him. One day when they are out herding, he brings them lunch – and they toss him down a well, then hatch a plan to sell him as a slave to some travelers. They take the multi-colored coat his father had given him, and smear it with animal blood, and tell Jacob that Joseph has been killed. *"And from anyone who takes your coat, do not withhold even your shirt."*

Joseph ends up in Egypt and goes through a series of highs and lows – but his ability to interpret dreams brings him to the attention of Pharaoh and ultimately he is appointed manager of the whole country.

He foresees a famine in the whole region and organizes a system to stockpile grain to see Egypt through – and then when the famine hits, everyone in the region comes calling, asking to buy grain.

Including his brothers. When they come before him to beg for grain, they do not recognize him – but he knows them.

He strings them along a little, getting some emotional revenge.

But in the end he not only sells them the grain, he arranges for the whole family to settle in Egypt where they can ride out the crisis in safety.

“Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.”

It is an astonishing story in so many ways – the great reversal of fortunes, the way Jacob and Joseph are reunited after decades during which Jacob thought his beloved son was dead.

But as amazing as anything is the way Joseph responds to the brothers who inflicted such abuse and trauma upon him – throwing him down a well, selling him to passing traders, telling his father he was dead?

Who can forgive that kind of abuse?

Someone who prays for his enemies.

The only way we can love those who hate or hurt or harm us, is to pray for them.

We, on our own strength, seem to have a lot of trouble doing unto others as we would have them do to us, though it’s the most logical thing in the world.

But the human heart doesn’t run on logic, and the human brain is wired for safety.

What kind of an idiot lets people steal from her and blesses his abusers?

Our limbic system is not down with that! We’re supposed to protect ourselves and our stuff and the people we love, and to love some more than others.

But one day, we will swim in love, and we will love every creature God has made as much as any other. This life is where we learn to do that.

Why should we bother, though? No one else is doing it.

Why not go with the “dog-eat-dog” world the way it is?

We do it because Jesus said do, and because there lies the way of transformation.

We don’t need to be stuck with injustice and trauma,

with endless cycles of racism and violence and ever-widening gaps in equity.

Each and every person who turns toward the Way of Love that Jesus commanded widens those circles of transformation.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu lived this way.

He suffered greatly under apartheid in South Africa.

Some might have responded to these realities by growing outwardly tough.

He responded by learning to lead with love and forgiveness –

which made them outwardly gentle, beautiful, and inwardly tough as steel.

And he had tremendous influence on millions of people.

Desmond Tutu helped to develop the Truth and Reconciliation process that helped countless South Africans to come to terms with the trauma they suffered or inflicted and to be set free from that cycle of vengeance and violence.

That process of restorative justice has been used in other countries and other settings, and has been proven more effective in lowering crime and bringing about peace than our system of retributive justice.

Do to others as you would have them do to you.

This “Golden Rule” matters greatly – for our societies, for our families – for our own souls. Because it is the way of freedom.

When we love someone who hates us, we disempower hatred.

When we forgive someone who’s hurt us, we take back the power.

When we give to someone who begs, or even steals, we remind ourselves that people matter more than things, and that this person is very broken.

And we who follow the way of Jesus are in the business of restoring broken people, breaking chains of oppression from within our without.

That’s why it matters, perhaps more than anything else we do as a church.

We are in the business of breaking the chains, setting people free.

And we can only do that when we’re free ourselves.

We start by cultivating the practice of praying for those we consider enemies, praying for people we don’t like, or who hurt us or those we love.

Praying for oppressors and manipulators, the corrupt and the cruel.

Hold them in the light of God and pray God bless them – not what they do, but who they are in the core of their being, who their mother gave birth to.

Why? Because nothing bad ever came of asking God to bless someone.

If it’s someone in our lives, we sometimes even see changes.

And certainly that prayer changes us – it is Boot Camp for the soul,

breaking us open like seeds from which God can bring abundant fruit.

Who are you called to pray blessing for? Try it this week.

Love is what will endure when everything else has passed away.

Let’s get good at it. *Amen.*

Luke 6:27-38

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."

Genesis 45:3-11, 15

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 you 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.