

2.20.2022, Epiphany 7

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Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40, 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50, Luke 6:27-38

“Be merciful, do good and love”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Today’s gospel contains words that we have heard many times, and yet Jesus’ words about loving others, even our enemies, are words that we often struggle with. I wonder if any of us here today, your pastor included, could say that they have mastered Jesus’ command to love others.

And yet sometimes the Christian message about love is belittled and even criticized for being wimpy and lightweight, an impractical ethic for a *realpolitik* world. Yet all of us know how difficult loving and accepting others truly is. At first glance, Jesus’ command to love one’s neighbor sounds noble enough, but Jesus’ command to love meets its most difficult test with his command, “*Love your enemies.*”

This text was on my mind last week, as I prepared for worship and as I was waiting one day in line at the grocery store. Only one register was open, and yet suddenly, there were about seven or eight people in line. The clerk at the open register finally said, “Register 3 will open soon.” So I moved in that direction along with a couple of other people. As we were about to enter the lane to register 3, someone actually pushed their cart through the lane for register 2, which was closed, and backed up into the lane for register 3 ahead of myself and everyone else. Now you can imagine the cold looks and abuse that were directed at this person. Someone behind me, said, under their breath, “Now I’ve truly seen everything...” Someone else nearby audibly muttered the magic phrase about “a special place” and “hell.” Leaving the question of “enemies” aside, simply loving one’s neighbor, can quickly become tested in the most everyday of places.

I think Jesus had a pretty good understanding of human nature. As a human being, Jesus practiced the gospel he preached, even forgiving those who crucified him. He experienced differences with religious and political leaders, and even experienced misunderstanding from his own family and friends in Nazareth.

So when Jesus spoke of loving enemies, he was speaking about something that he understood as a human being. The simple example I just used involves strangers in a public space, yet when Jesus speaks about “enemies” he is speaking about people who are much better known to us – or at least people we think we know more about. They could be people of another nation, an

opposing political faction, another religion, another ethnicity, gender or orientation; they could even be members of our own family.

The story of Joseph and his brothers in the reading from Genesis is a marvelous example of this. Perhaps no one would have criticized Joseph if he had paid his brothers back with a merciless fury of anger. However, Joseph treated them with love, saying that what they had done had allowed God to do something greater. Just when we think Joseph might repay his brothers with anger and revenge, he meets them with love and mercy. The story of Joseph and his brothers gives life to Jesus' description that God "*is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked,*" and so we are to "*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*"

The beginning of Luke's Gospel and the Christmas narrative give us another example of God's mercy to all people. On that holy night the heavens rang out with the words, "*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!*" The mercy of God is announced as peace on earth, and God's favor for all people. In Jesus, God makes peace with all people, reconciling the earth and its peoples with forgiveness, mercy and love.

Perhaps you have seen the 2005 film *Joyeux Noël* (Merry Christmas) that tells of an historical incident during World War I on Christmas Eve 1914, when French, Scottish and German soldiers stopped fighting and met one another as friends rather than as enemies. It is a powerful moment in which their common humanity overrides their opposition as enemies. In this powerful scene on Christmas Eve night the message of peace on earth became very real when enemies laid down their weapons to meet one another as friends. If you have not seen the film, it is worth tracking down. Today's gospel about love for enemies is the reason God became human in Jesus – that we might also see our enemies as the object of God's love.

It is impossible to think of this word "enemy" and not to also think about its opposite, "friend." No matter who they are, Jesus calls all people friends. This puts "our" enemies in perspective: Jesus comes to a sinful humanity – to all people and their enemies – offering peace and reconciliation.

So when Jesus says, "*love your enemies,*" he is talking about a love that has the power to change us more and more into loving and merciful people – people who will pray for and show mercy to all, even their enemies. The love Jesus describes is the verb form of "*agape,*" of the well-known words "*God is love.*" Θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν, or "*God is agape.*" Jesus describes this love as a positive ethic: "*do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*"

All of last week, I had that well-known passage from 1 John 4 on my mind, "*We love because he*

*first loved us.*” Because God is love, God loves each of us as well as those we may call enemies. It seems strange that it is we who often decide who is worthy of our love and who is not. Jesus certainly understood this, saying, “*If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. But love, do good and lend expecting nothing in return.*” Being merciful is God’s nature, and Jesus invites us to share in God’s nature by caring for others – even our enemies.

Perhaps some of you are familiar with the great Christian classic titled *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. In that book à Kempis wrote about not judging the faults of others, writing,

Bear with the faults and frailties of others, for you also have many faults which others have to tolerate. We expect others to be perfect, but we do not correct our own faults. We like to see others severely reprimanded, but we are unwilling to be corrected ourselves. We wish to restrict the liberty of others, but we are not willing to be denied anything ourselves. So it is very clear that we rarely consider our neighbor in the same light as ourselves...God has designed things so that we may learn to bear one another’s burdens...so that we become tolerant of each other, help, teach and advise one another.

Thomas à Kempis was right. We rarely view ourselves with the same severity that we view others. We rarely extend to our enemies the same mercy that we expect for ourselves. This is what makes the Christmas Eve scene in *Joyeux Noël* so dangerous: mercy and love for one’s enemies makes war upon war itself. God’s love is the most dangerous sort of love, because it will change war into peace and enemies into friends. God’s love changes us.

Each Sunday, we kneel before God in prayer, expecting God to be merciful and loving to us. We expect God to forgive us and release us from judgment. In the same way, do we ask for God’s mercy upon our enemies? Do we seek to live out Jesus’ words, “*Do to others as you would have them do to you?*”

Jesus’ message is “be merciful, do good and love.” If we cannot love the sister and brother we have seen, we cannot claim to love the God whom we have not seen.

Be merciful, do good and love. God’s love alive in us has the power to change the world through us. The measure of mercy and love you give will be the measure you get back.

Be merciful, do good and love, for God is love. Amen.