

Loving Our Enemies
Genesis 45:3 – 11, 15; Luke 6:27 – 38
Sunday, February 24, 2019

Five years ago, a 21-year-old man was driving his car around Austin, Texas. He had been drinking and was driving without his headlights on. A policeman saw him and tried to stop him, but he got scared because he had several outstanding warrants, and he took off. He ended up driving down a one-way street at over 50 mph, right into a crowd gathering for a music festival. Five people were killed, and 25 people were injured. The man was arrested and sentenced to spend the rest of his life in prison without the possibility of parole.

I either hadn't heard about this story when it first happened, or I had forgotten about it, until this week when I came across a post on social media written by a young woman who was one of the people in that crowd. She said, "I was the twenty-fifth [person he hit]. I broke my back and neck in four places...A lot of people in my life thought he should get the death penalty. But I never had strong feelings about it. Maybe I disconnected from my emotions. Maybe it's just my personality. But I mostly just felt sad that he's so young, and he'll be in jail for the rest of his life. Recently I looked up the address of his prison. I purchased a PO Box, and I wrote him three letters. I've held onto them for months without sending them. I guess I'm struggling with the fact that empathy is a privilege. I'm still alive. I'm still able to walk. There are people who lost more than me who might be upset that I'm showing him any compassion at all. But I find it curious that I know nothing about somebody who had such a profound impact on my life. All three letters begin the exact same way: 'We've never met, but we were in the same place at the same time.' I'm not sure what I'm looking for. I just figure there's something to be said. And I'd like to figure out what that is."¹

¹ Posted on Facebook by "Humans of New York," February 19, 2019

There's a sense in which I think a lot of us can relate to that. Because we hear Jesus' words here – “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” – and we know that we *should* do that, that as followers of Christ we are *called* to do that. We know *what* Jesus says. The problem is, we don't always know *how to do it*. Like that young woman, we end up holding on to our forgiveness because we can't quite figure out what it looks like to *extend* it.

What Jesus calls us to here is really, really hard.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once preached a sermon on this text, and in it he said, “I am certain that Jesus understood the difficulty inherent in the act of loving one's enemy. He never joined the ranks of those who talk glibly about the easiness of the moral life. He realized that every genuine expression of love grows out of a consistent and total surrender to God. So when Jesus said, ‘Love your enemy,’ he was not unmindful of its stringent qualities. Yet he meant every word of it. Our responsibility as Christians is to discover the meaning of this command and seek passionately to live it out in our daily lives. *How do we love our enemies?*”²

King was no stranger to the hardness of this challenge. This was something that he was struggling with at the time he was preaching about it – leading the Civil Rights Movement and facing slander and violence and death threats against his family and himself. He had a lot of enemies. He goes on to say in that sermon, “We should be happy that [Jesus] did not say, ‘*Like* your enemies.’ It is almost impossible to like some people. ‘Like’ is a sentimental and affectionate word. How can we be affectionate toward a person whose avowed aim is to crush our very being and place innumerable stumbling blocks on our path? How can we like a person

² <https://www.onfaith.co/onfaith/2015/01/19/martin-luther-king-jr-on-loving-your-enemies/35907>

who is threatening our children and bombing our homes? This is impossible. But,” he says, “Jesus recognized that *love* is greater than *like*.”

Love is not just a feeling or emotion, something that exists in our hearts or in our heads. That’s how we often think about it. But the kind of love that Jesus is talking about here is *action*. Not what we *feel* but what we *do*. Paul says in 1 Corinthians that love is acting in ways that are patient and kind, not in ways that are envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. It is not acting in ways that are irritable or resentful. Love is not rejoicing in wrongdoing or celebrating someone else’s failures and mistakes. Love celebrates the *truth*, wherever and in whomever it is found. Love is acting in ways that *bear with* this other person, *believe* this other person, *hope* for this other person, and *stick with* this person, no matter what.

While it may not always be possible to *like* this other person or *feel* love for them, it *is* possible to *act* in ways that show patience and kindness and hope, even with the people with whom we most vehemently disagree.³ Because that does not depend on *them*. That depends on *us* and how *we* choose to be. And loving our enemies like that does not mean we have to *agree* with what they have done or allow them to continue hurting us. As King says, “Forgiveness does not mean ignoring what has been done or putting a false label on an evil act. It means, rather, that the evil act no longer remains as a barrier to the relationship.”⁴ Or, as one author says, “To be ‘kind’ does not mean to *approve* but means to seek the best interest.”⁵ Love is about acting in ways that seek the best interest – not just *my* best interest, but also *this other person’s* best interest.

³ *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year C*, pg. 158

⁴ <https://www.onfaith.co/onfaith/2015/01/19/martin-luther-king-jr-on-loving-your-enemies/35907>

⁵ Ronald J. Allen, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3967

Jesus says we do that by *doing good* to those who hate us (not just “not hating or hurting them back,” but *actively doing good* to them); by *blessing* those who curse us; by *praying* for those who abuse us; not *judging*, not *condemning*, but *forgiving*, letting go of our anger and desire for punishment or payback. It’s about acting in ways that seek the good and the wellbeing of this other person, despite what they have done. Because loving like that forces them to see us as something more than enemies, and it forces us to see them as something more than enemies. It forces all of us to take a deeper, harder look at each other.

Jesus never promises us that loving our enemies like this will convert our enemies into friends or change their behavior or even change our own feelings toward them.⁶ It may not. But that’s not why we do this. We are called to love our enemies because *that’s who God is*. Jesus says, “God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” In Matthew’s gospel he says, “God makes the sun rise on the evil *and* on the good and sends rain on the righteous *and* on the unrighteous.” So, he says, “be merciful, just as God is merciful.” Mercy is releasing people from the punishment that they deserve. In Jesus Christ God has shown us mercy, releasing us from the punishment of our sins. And God calls us to do the same with each other, especially with our enemies.

Again, this is not easy. It is *incredibly* hard, and it doesn’t fit with the culture in which we live. It doesn’t make sense in the kingdom of man. It looks like *weakness*. But we are called to be about the kingdom of *God*. To show the world a *different* way of living and being. And *that* takes incredible courage and strength.

We see all of this at work in the story of Joseph and his brothers. For those unfamiliar with this story, this is *not* Joseph the father of Jesus. This is centuries before Jesus. Joseph was one of 12

⁶ *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year C*, pg. 159

sons, and their father Jacob favored *him* over all the others. So Joseph's brothers were jealous of him. One day they had had enough. They attacked him and were going to kill him, until one of the brothers said, "No, don't kill him. Let's throw him in a pit until we decide what to do with him." As strange as it sounds, they showed him mercy. Instead of killing him, they sell him into slavery. He is taken to Egypt, where he comes to serve in the house of Pharaoh. Through a series of events, Pharaoh comes to trust him, and he rises in power in Pharaoh's household until he is the second most powerful man in all of Egypt. He interprets Pharaoh's dreams to predict that a seven-year famine is coming, so he begins stockpiling food so that Egypt will not starve.

The famine *does* come, and it begins to affect his family back in Israel. His brothers hear that there is food in Egypt, but they don't know that Joseph is the one doing it, because they figure he's dead by now. They go to Egypt in search of food, and they come face to face with their brother, but they don't recognize him because he looks like an Egyptian now. Now, it should be noted here that Joseph does not instantly forgive his brothers and love his enemies. He torments them first – really puts them through it – which I think only emphasizes exactly how *hard* this is, even for these great heroes of our faith. Even *they* struggle with this.

Where we picked up the story in our reading this morning is when Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers. Through tears, he tells his brothers, "I am Joseph." But, it says, "his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence." They knew what they had done to him. And they were probably terrified that he was going to take revenge on them, maybe even *kill* them. But we get this moment where Joseph says, "Come closer to me. 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...So it was not *you* who sent me here, but *God*...I will provide for you, so that you do not come into poverty." And then,

it says, “he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.”

After the incredible suffering that Joseph had endured – all because of his brothers – he is able to let go of any anger and hatred and resentment, any desire for vengeance, and *love* them, because he sees God’s presence and power in all of this.

What would it look like if *we* were able to say to *our* enemies, those *we* are at odds with, “Come closer to me. I am your brother/sister, and you are mine. Do not be distressed or angry, for God is at work among us.” And then to *act* in ways that *bless* them and *provide* for them and *preserve life*. I’m not saying it’s *easy*. I’m just saying it’s *possible*. And remember back in the beginning of the story, how Joseph’s brothers showed him mercy by not killing him. It was *because* of their mercy that Joseph was later able to save them from the famine. We never know how *our* acts of mercy might be used by God to do something we can’t even imagine at the time. Like Jesus says, “The measure you *give* will be the measure you *get back*.”

Author Robert Darden says, “This life is not easy; it asks a lot. It requires us to abandon the cycle of violence and retribution, rejecting at last the self-defeating logic of ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.’” It calls us to expand the circle of our concern beyond the narrow boundaries of our group or tribe. In directing us to give even the shirt off our back, it demands a radical dependence on the God who has promised to provide for us. Most of all, it asks us to sacrifice our long-cherished sense of aggrievement toward our enemies, rendering them in the process not

enemies at all, but fellow sinners forgiven by God...By lending, by loving, by giving, by forgiving, by showing mercy, by doing all of these things, we enter into the very life of God.”⁷

Yes, someone may take advantage of your love and your forgiveness and your kindness. We always run that risk. But Jesus does not call us to *worry* about that or live in *fear* of that. Jesus calls us to live in ways that show love and to trust that God will take care of everything else.

⁷ Robert F. Darden, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Year C, Volume 1, Pg. 268.