

Sermon on Luke 6:27-38, Genesis 45:3-11,15
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, February 24, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ...

If anyone were to think that practicing the Christian faith is easy, and not a challenge, I hope you were listening closely to the gospel just read. We have just heard Jesus' teaching to "*love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*" Yeah, right. This has not been the behavior marking Christians in recent years. In today's climate of division in politics and daily life, we don't see enough of those who claim Jesus as Lord following his teaching here. It's hard enough to overcome divisions in our own families! So, is there anyone here who hasn't experienced issues or tension or family drama with relatives, parents and siblings? The Bible is full of such rivalries and tensions! And I'll bet your family dramas can't match it!

Most of us know the story of Joseph, if not from the Bible or Sunday School, at least you saw the Broadway musical or heard the song: "Jo-jo-jo-Joseph" But on the chance you slept through the 1970s, 80s and 90s - or just haven't heard, here's a recap, from the book of Genesis.

Joseph was the youngest of the twelve sons of Jacob, who was now an old man. He was his father's favorite. Jacob had a coat of many colors made for Joseph, which made his 11 brothers very jealous. Joseph also had a gift from God, in the ability to interpret dreams, which later helped him greatly, but now just made his brothers more jealous. He told them one day how he had a dream that the grains of the field, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars all bowed down to him. That made all of his brothers so angry that they couldn't take it anymore, and wanted to kill him. Instead, they sold him to slave traders, who sold him as a slave in Egypt, far away from home. (Which made them part of the original slave trade.) They told their father Jacob that Joseph was dead. Long story short, Joseph's ability to interpret dreams for the Pharaoh made him a successful and powerful person in Egypt. So when we come to the story in today's lesson, Joseph's brothers had come to Egypt during a great famine to buy grain. Joseph discovered them, and surprised them all – that he was alive and well, and had the power to have them imprisoned or killed – they bowed in fear. His first dream had come true!

But instead of seeking revenge, or selling them into slavery as they had done to him, Joseph had the greatest surprise of all: *Joseph forgave them!* He still loved them as family, and following his faith in God, he had mercy and compassion for them. He let them settle near him in Egypt, and provided for their needs. Now, THAT'S LOVE – a love that overcame all hate and anger, and reconciled this

family, that had been fractured by envy and division. God's compassionate love was revealed through Joseph, as an example for us all – and a great surprise!

We human beings are used to our relationships being *transactional*. Perhaps family and friendships are based on love, but most relationships in society are not. In business, if you give me this product, I will pay you this amount of money. If you live in my house, you will pay me rent. In politics, if you vote for my bill, I will vote for yours. If you support my campaign with a financial contribution, I will take your wishes into account. If you do the work, I will give you a fair paycheck. If you want to date my daughter, you will treat her right! If you scratch my back, I will scratch yours. It is all very simple and clear!

It goes further than that, especially when transactions are broken. I will more likely love you if you love me, but if you hate me, I will likely hate you as well. If you mistreat me or someone I value, I will get you back, and mistreat you. If your family harms someone in my family, then we will harm you (this is where “blood feuds” come from – like the Martins and the Coys). Getting revenge for a perceived wrong, to even the score, is based on “transactional” relationships. Modern politics and business are filled with such transactions. If you insult my candidate, I will insult yours. If you produce a negative campaign ad against me, I will hit back with one against you. If you criticize me publicly, I will do my best to get you fired. As Gandhi once said, if we continue to follow the law of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, soon the whole world will be blind and toothless!” We're getting there! Where does it stop? And who will stop it? Who will take the first step to break the chain? Someone will have to, whether you follow Donald Trump or find hope in Robert Mueller!

In the Biblical story of Joseph, God flipped the transaction rule on its head, when Joseph forgave his brothers. The Old Testament expanded the view of who should be treated with love and mercy – rather than merely by the rules of transaction. We hear the greatest commandment in Deuteronomy: “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength – and your neighbor as yourself.*” So God taught the people of Israel to love their neighbors (not only their families), and even show compassion and mercy to strangers and aliens in their land. God showed mercy and forgiveness, and commands those who follow God's ways to show mercy and forgiveness to others, as a matter of faith. The prophets' task was to point out to the people when they fell short of mercy. Which was often.

In the gospel, the sending of Jesus into the world was God's way of upsetting our continuing human violence against each other, the laws of retribution and the honor codes of revenge (which still exist). Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (in Matthew), “*You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”* In Matthew and in Luke, Jesus said, “*But 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 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.” (Such love and lending are “transactional” in basis – not based on love or mercy!) Jesus said: *“But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great...Be merciful, just as your Father [in heaven] 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.”*

This is all so simple and clear, right? Just as clear as those old transactions! It’s just flipped on its head – along with all our expectations about how the world works! Some of us have heard these teachings from Jesus to shower radical love, blessing, forgiveness, generosity, and trust on enemies and outsiders, not just our families, friends and neighbors. So very simple – but oh, so hard! Can you do it? This is not the way the world usually works, or how we think naturally in our daily lives! If someone cheats or mistreats us, we don’t want to look like fools! We’d rather put them “in their place”. Even – especially – in our own family or church!

But today we hear the good news (which challenges us) in the gospel. God breaks into our world through Jesus, and calls you and me to live a different way. It’s a different way in politics, in our relationships with our adversaries – even in our families and with our friends and colleagues! When someone breaks the law, our justice system has its own rules, and will often put them in prison. But what about *restorative justice*, in which a person can make amends to the person or people they wronged, pay their debts and come back into the community. Would that be a better way, in some cases? Does mercy ever have a place?

We hear so much anger and hate these days for undocumented immigrants, who were unable to come into this country by obtaining legal documents. The broken “system” has not made it possible. Still, many say *“unless they come here legally, they must be deported or detained.”* Some tell lies about them, and accuse them of being drug dealers and rapists. But what if there are ways to show mercy and love to the undocumented, many of whom have been our neighbors, co-workers and friends for decades, and find a just way to make them neighbors without fear? Who are we to judge, when our grandparents and ancestors came to this land for the same reasons? Where does the anger and hate for them come from? It is not from faith or from God! Hate and anger come from fear and misunderstanding, it is the devil’s work, and is only used by those seeking political power or to harm those whom they don’t know or understand. Love for neighbor is from God! And love is what we need most.

The music we hear in churches and in popular culture is often based on “love”. Fifty years ago, the Beatles wrote and sang beautiful love songs. In 1969, in their final album “Abbey Road”, they sang: *“And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.”* Such love is an inspiring thought, with beautiful music, but it’s only an equation. It’s nowhere near as challenging or as transformational as Jesus’ radical invitation to love your enemies, real and perceived! The gospel FLIPS all our assumptions! For when we all fall short of Jesus’s call to love one another, thankfully, God’s love is based on mercy and grace – not a transaction! For God is love! God loves you no matter what! Jesus died on a cross, even as he forgave his executioners, so that even as he died, you and I and all the world, our friends and our enemies, will live forever! This is the true power of love. So Jesus invites you and me to receive God’s mercy, and learn to forgive others, as God forgives us! But thanks be to God, our salvation doesn’t depend only upon you and me loving others. Our salvation is based on God’s love, God’s mercy and God’s grace alone! So, may God give you and me the strength to love others, as Christ has loved us. Amen.

For the family of Raytrell Benjamin, who was tragically shot two blocks from this church, while sitting in his car outside of his home last Thursday, that the shooter will be found and brought to justice. May his family find comfort in their grief, and that senseless gun violence will end in our community and nation.