

**“Loving Enemies”**

February 24, 2019

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## Genesis 45:3-11

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.

4 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.

5 And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 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. 7 God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.

8 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. 9 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. 10 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.

11 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.’

## Luke 6:27-38

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

29 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.

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

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

32 “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.

34 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.

35 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.

36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

37 “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.

Forgive, and you will be forgiven;

38 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.”

## FAMILIAR BUT IMPOSSIBLE?

Today’s New Testament lesson is quite familiar.  
You’ve heard it all before.

Jesus tells us,  
Love your enemies.  
Do good to those who hate you.

Bless those who curse you.

Pray for those who abuse you.

Turn the other cheek.  
Be merciful.

Don't judge.  
Forgive.

We know this.  
The children in our Sunday School classes  
know this.

But, knowing is not enough.  
How do we put the words of Jesus into practice?

How can we put the words of Jesus into practice?  
We could argue that such radical forgiveness is impossible.

But, from time to time we hear a miraculous story of forgiveness that takes our breath away. And we wonder, "Is it true? Is such radical forgiveness really possible?"

I think it's possible that Jesus' radical understanding of grace might have been based upon one of these stories of miraculous forgiveness.

## JOSEPH'S STORY

For example, think about our Old Testament lesson for today. It's a vignette from a larger saga about a man named Joseph.

Many of you remember that story.  
Daddy loved Joseph best  
and that made Joseph's brothers jealous.  
In fact they were so jealous  
...they wanted to kill their brother.

But, instead Joseph was sold into slavery.  
He spent many years in captivity and servitude.  
And yet, through it all, the Lord was with Joseph.

Eventually he rose to be a ruler in the land of Egypt,  
and he helped the Egyptians prepare for a time of famine.

This meant that people from all over the region would come to buy grain.  
And Joseph was the man you had to see if you were going to buy grain.

Well, it just so happened that the brothers who had sold Joseph into slavery  
also came to buy grain.

They didn't recognize their brother.  
I guess he looked more Egyptian than Hebrew.

Joseph tested and toyed with his brothers  
for a while.  
He wanted to see if they had changed.

Finally Joseph decided to reveal who he really was.

He sent everyone else out of the room and cried so loudly that those outside the room wondered what in the world was going on in there.

He said, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?"

The brothers don't know what to say.  
What do you say to the person you threw into a pit and left for dead?

COME CLOSER TO ME

So Joseph tells his brothers, "Come closer to me."

That must have sent a jolt of terror  
down their spines.

They lived in a world that believed  
in an "eye for an eye" and so forth.

Coming closer was not what they wanted to do.

But, here's the surprise in the story.  
Joseph doesn't take retribution.

He forgives them.

Joseph says,

“Don’t be filled with anger or guilt.

I believe God sent me here for a purpose.

If I hadn’t come to Egypt, many people would have died from the famine, including my family.

So, God, in a mysterious way brought salvation through your bad behavior.”

Joseph not only forgave his brothers.

He loved them.

The Bible tells us that he kissed them and wept on their necks.

These brothers who had treated Joseph so badly were shown mercy.

Do you want to know what Jesus was talking about when he said, “Love your enemies”?

Read Joseph’s story.

God’s providence and God’s love are on full display.

Joseph does not treat his brothers as they have treated him.

Instead, Joseph sees the bigger picture.

God has been with Joseph and was merciful to him in good times and bad.

And out of that knowledge Joseph shows mercy and forgiveness toward his brothers.

They had become enemies...but now, by the grace of God, they would once again be family.

## A MIRACLE OF FORGIVENESS

I love this story.

I want to be like Joseph.

I want to forgive with no strings attached.

I want to love enemies.

But, we need to remember that Joseph's story would not have ended this way if God had not intervened in his life.

Joseph, on his own, could not have forgiven his brothers in such a dramatic way.

Joseph's forgiveness is a miracle that was years in the making.

When Joseph was betrayed by his brothers, surely anger, pain and the desire for revenge were a big part of his life for a long time.

But, Joseph's story did not end with the story of brothers who became enemies.

Despite many years of exile and servitude, Joseph also experienced God's grace. God saved Joseph and that salvation had a purpose:

to demonstrate the power of God's love and forgiveness.

Our passage from Luke is familiar. But, that does not mean that it is easy to apply.

As it was with Joseph, learning to love our enemies can be a long and winding road. And in the end that forgiveness depends upon the greatest miracle of all:

the miracle of God's grace.

We don't love our enemies because we are so good. We love our enemies because God is so good.

And sometimes loving our enemies is a process that can take a lifetime.

## NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE

There is a theological problem with our passage for today.

Namely, how can we resist the temptation to perpetuate the cycle of violence,  
while at the same time standing up to the forces of evil?

The response of nonviolence is not enough.

If all you hear from this passage is turn the other cheek, your face is going to get awfully red.

If all you hear in this passage is give your enemy the shirt off your back, before long you will have a hard time finding something to wear!

In the past (and sometimes even today) passages like these were used to render vulnerable and victimized people subject to even further abuse.

For example, some preachers have counseled people to stay with abusive spouses and have used these verses as proof of God's will to do so.

Nonsense.

Jesus never ever condoned abuse.

In fact Jesus sharply criticized political and religious leaders who took advantage of those who were like sheep without a shepherd.

And even when Jesus was crucified on the cross, he was not a victim.

The Bible tells us he willingly laid down his life.

The cross was an act of divine protest.

The cross was an act of divine nonviolent resistance.

The key word is resistance.

Forgiveness and reconciliation come at a price, a very high price.

On the cross we see the high price of forgiveness.

But, don't think for a moment that the cross glorifies abuse.

Jesus is not telling people to remain in abusive, hurtful relationships.

Sometimes the first step in loving our enemies is to leave them.

Sometimes the first step in loving our enemies is simply to put some distance between us.

And always the first step in loving our enemies is to resist the injustice that they perpetuate.

## FORGIVENESS AND HEALING

But, even when we leave our enemies...

...even when we put some distance between ourselves and those who abuse us

...the abuse lives on in our mind.

The first reason we forgive those who abuse us is that allows us to be free.

Jesus does not want the memory of those abusive relationships to control the rest of our life.

And sometimes this is the best we can do.

We pray for our enemies from afar so that they don't have the opportunity to harm us any more.

But, we remain open to the possibility that, by the grace of God, those relationships that we thought were broken forever, might be restored in some way.

Sometimes, by the power of the Spirit,

Joseph's story can become our story.

Sometimes God's future of love and mercy breaks into our world.

This is a sign of the kingdom that comes.

This is a harbinger of that ultimate gracious finale.

As the prophet put it,

One day the lion will lay down with the lamb.

One day we will beat our swords into plowshares.

It's important that we cling to that vision.

Because without that vision we perish in a sea of anger.

Without that vision, violence is perpetuated

in our world  
and in our own heart.

## THE GOLDEN RULE

In today's passage we have a rendition of the golden rule.

"Do to others as you would have them do to you."  
In order to follow the golden rule we must have a measure of empathy.

Can we walk a mile in the shoes of our enemy?  
Can we understand why they do what they do?  
Can we refrain from judgment  
until all the facts are in?

That's how we learn to love our enemies.  
And it's a hard thing to do.

I must admit.  
I would rather join the chorus of those  
who mirror my views  
and reject out of hand those who think differently.

But, this will only promote a cycle  
of anger and violence.

How many times have you found yourself talking back to the politicians you  
hear on TV?  
I have.

And often my words are not a prayer  
for their well being!

Somehow we must find a way to love  
and pray for our enemies.  
We must look for signs of God's grace

in this sea of discord.

We don't do this because we are so good.  
We do this because we believe God is good.

## THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS

The Bible teaches that one word of forgiveness has the power to overcome evil.

And this power lies not with the oppressor but with the victim.

One commentator pointed out that only the survivor could say what Joseph said.

Joseph's brothers could never ask for or demand forgiveness.

What they had done was truly unforgivable.

But, by the grace of God,  
Joseph's heart was filled with love and forgiveness.

The Bible is filled with miracle stories.  
Over and over again God delivers his people  
from slavery and hunger and exile and military threat.

But, maybe the greatest miracle of all is when God delivers us from our  
own sinfulness,  
when God forgives what we think is unforgivable.

And, by the grace of God, we too are enabled to forgive and even love our  
enemies.

## A PROCESS

This is not an easy or a quick process, for the victim or the one who perpetrates the evil.

I imagine what it must have been like for Joseph's brothers, living all those years with the hidden guilt and shame that burned a hole in their heart.

How many years of struggle did it take for Joseph to come to the point where he could say,

“Come closer to me”?

Come closer not to be destroyed,  
but to be forgiven and given a new life.

In doing this Joseph not only forgave his brothers, he also laid the ground-work for a people who were chosen by God to demonstrate the power and potential of God’s grace.

This one act of forgiveness  
became a primary story of faith  
This story taught God’s people who they were  
and who they were called to be.

In the same way, when we find the grace to forgive,  
we change not only our relationship with the brothers and sisters whom we forgive,

we tell a story about the kingdom that comes,

...about God’s will being done on earth  
as it is in heaven.

## OUR STORY OF FORGIVENESS

I believe that our story will be a lot like Joseph’s story.

Forgiveness and love for enemies is easy to talk about and understand.

But, often that miracle takes a lifetime to experience.

In the meantime, we get glimpses of God’s future today.

Turning the cheek happens unexpectedly after seasons of hurt and anger.

We sometimes treat others as we would like to be treated, but only after many missteps along the way.

After years of separation something changes.  
What once seemed impossible now becomes possible.

We hear Jesus' call to reconciliation.

We say "come closer to me"...not to wound or punish but to talk, embrace,  
and kiss.

The rush to judgment has been amplified in our world.

The powers that be seek to control us by emphasizing our differences and  
our pain.

But, I wonder what would happen if we, empowered by the Spirit, could  
learn to amplify the message of God's forgiveness, mercy and grace?

What Jesus teaches us today is easy to understand.  
But, it's hard to put into practice.

It won't all come at once.  
Sometimes it will develop over years of trial and error.

But, it will come.

It won't come because we're so good.  
It will come because God is so good.

One day the lion will lay down with the lamb.  
One day we will beat our swords into plowshares.  
Be a part of that new world today. Love your enemies.

Amen.