

Sermon for Epiphany 7C  
Sunday, February 20, 2022  
“Love and forgiveness”

Texts: Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Luke 6:27-38

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Some years ago, I remember reading the story of a woman named Iphigenia Mukantabana. Iphigenia is from the African nation of Rwanda. In the 1990s there was a war between the two major ethnic groups of that nation, the Hutus and Tutsis, and the conflict between them resulted in the slaughter of between 800,000 and 1 million Tutsis by Hutu extremists. One day, Hutu extremists entered Iphigenia’s home where they hacked and clubbed to death her husband and five children right in front of her. She witnessed girls and women being raped; she saw men and boys getting beaten and slaughtered; she watched as countless numbers of people were forced to dig holes, get in the holes they dug, and were buried alive. How horrible that must have been for her to witness! What a devastating loss that was for Iphigenia, to lose her own family through the horrendous actions of those extremists. One can only imagine the hate she might have held in her heart and the vengeance she might have wished for. But, Iphigenia was a Christian. She described how, through her faith and later efforts by the Rwandan government at reconciliation, she found the strength to go on, to move past the devastation she lived through, and forgive the man who had killed her family. Iphigenia made peace with those who had done such wrong to her and her family. There is a picture of Iphigenia sitting in church. Sitting next to her is a man; that man was Jean-Bosco Bizimana, the man who killed her husband and five children. Fourteen years after she lost her family, she found herself making peace baskets with women of her community to earn money for herself and their community. She made those baskets with her best friend, Epiphania. Epiphania was the wife of Jean-Bosco Bizimana.

Today’s reading from Genesis tells the story of Joseph, the eleventh son of Jacob by his second wife Rachel, and one of the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. Many years prior to today’s reading, Joseph’s brothers wanted to kill him out of jealousy and throw him in a ditch. You see, their father, Isaac, loved Joseph more than all of his children, because God had blessed him with a son in his old age. But instead of killing Joseph, they sold him to a caravan of Ishmaelites—the tribe of their uncle—who took Joseph to Egypt. And while in Egypt, Joseph became a trusted member of the pharaoh’s household after interpreting his dreams. One of those dreams predicted a famine and through Joseph’s gift to interpret dreams, he advised the pharaoh to store up grain, and in gratitude, the pharaoh made Joseph lord of his house and ruler of the land of Egypt. When the famine hit, it affected all of the lands in the region, but Egypt had stored massive amounts of grain, so people from all around went to Egypt seeking grain. Among those seeking grain were the Israelites, and when they went to Egypt they had to ask the ruler of Egypt to give them grain. That ruler would be their brother, Joseph,

whom they had sold all those years ago. You might expect that Joseph, realizing who these Israelites were, would have used his power and position to take revenge on his brothers. He could have said, “Go away, you pigs. After what you did to me, you can eat dirt and die, for all I care!” But instead, he said, “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. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing 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.” Joseph forgave his brothers, he showed them extreme love, and saved his people. Later, Joseph secured land in Egypt for the people of Israel to inhabit and prosper.

If there’s something I hope people recognize when they think about and observe what Christians do, I hope that it’s in the way we show love. But in this day and age that doesn’t seem always to be the case. We don’t like others getting the best of us. We don’t like for somebody else to have the upper hand. We don’t like others thinking that we are weak. We don’t like it when someone harms us or does us wrong. But, Jesus has shown us a better way to live. A way to live that brings us peace, that brings us comfort, that allows us to live life from day to day.

In last week’s Gospel from the beginning of Chapter 6 of Luke, we heard the words of Jesus in his Sermon on the Plain. “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven.” Jesus offered powerful words of hope for people who lived in pretty troubled times. Judeans were living under the rule of the Roman Empire. Although they had a king, he was a puppet of the Roman governor. The people who needed to hear Jesus’ message the most found themselves caught between the thumbs of their civic rulers and the index fingers of their religious leaders. Jesus’ empowering words from the midst of the plain gave them hope that someday life would get better, if not in their lifetime, certainly in the glorious afterlife. But what should people living in such despair and oppression do until things did, in fact, get better? That’s where today’s gospel lesson picks up.

The advice that Jesus gave was cautiously radical, boldly unconventional, and possibly unimaginable. *Love* your enemies. *Do good* to those who hate you. *Bless* those who curse you. *Pray* for those who abuse you. Because despite their actions at a given moment, there’s one thing that enemies, haters, cursers, and abusers have in common: they’re all people just like you and I. They’re all people with hopes, dreams, ambitions,

passions, and ideas about the way things ought to be, but may find themselves in a situation where things are not as they think they ought to be. Jesus was challenging his listeners to act in a way vastly different from the way people usually act, to react differently from the way the world usually acts, to become a different kind of human being—a human being who not only respects everyone, but one who strives to stay in relationship with one another.

We don't live in the time or place when and where Jesus lived. By our standards, Jesus lived in a third-world dictatorship. We live in what we think is a modern, developed world, but the problems that we face in our own time are just as they were thousands of years ago. We have to deal with many of the same “-isms” that Jesus and his contemporaries would have encountered: sexism, racism, classism, violation of our rights by government and law enforcement, hurt and betrayal by people close to us, violence, insecurity, anxiety, addiction, depression. But, in the midst of all that we face in our lives, this morning's gospel lesson implores us to search deep in our hearts to a place of love, compassion, respect, and care. Just imagine if we ran our own lives and our world doing the things that Jesus asked us to do! This would be a very different world. Many of the conflicts that we see happening in the world would not happen, if only governments and regimes were willing to sit down at the table of diplomacy, instead of trying to take by force what doesn't belong to them. If only civic leaders would act in a way that benefitted the people more than just attempts to get re-elected and hold on to power. If only we could face the conflicts in our own personal lives in the way that Jesus directed us to do! Our lives and this world would be a much better place to live.

See, Jesus was trying to point out that even though we have so much to look forward to in the coming kingdom of God, we still have to deal with life in the here and now. Adversity and despair will not disappear, they are a part of daily life, so we have to learn how to deal with the rocky road of life. Living life without love and forgiveness will mean that we will remain stuck in a life of darkness and hopelessness. Just like Joseph who forgave his brothers or Iphigenia Mukantabana when she forgave the man who had slaughtered her family, we must let go of hate, jealousy, fear, and feelings of vengeance.

Jesus preached that in order for us to live in the image of the true God, we need to love, do good, bless, and pray, not just toward the folks we like, but also those who do us wrong, who harm us, those who act in a way that we don't expect. We don't always know the full story behind a person's actions—not justifying someone's bad actions or crime—but realizing that behind every action is a human being trying to live life. Sometimes one's attempt will conflict with someone else's. That's when we have to heed the powerful words of Jesus to love, do good, bless, and pray, so that we can bring our own lives and this world a little closer to God's kingdom here on earth. Amen.

Resources

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