

Scripture

Genesis 45:3–11, 15

3 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.’

15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Luke 6:27-38

Love for Enemies

27 “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.[e] 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.”

Message – Who are you going to be?

Love your enemies, Jesus said.

This has got to be one of his hardest teachings. Isn't the whole definition of an enemy that they are horrible, crappy people? Unlovable, unlikable, intolerable? After all, if they were even slightly worthy of being loved, they wouldn't be our enemies, would they?

So, when we hear 'love your enemies,' we have some ideas of how we'd like to love them.

We'd love our enemies to be far away.

We'd love to never see their faces, never have them come near us, our property, or those we *truly* love.

We'd love them to be alone, lonely, miserable.

We'd love them to be racked with feeling of guilt and remorse for the way they have treated us and others.

We'd love them to suffer.

I'd like to think this is how I could love my enemies, but I suspect that this kind of loving is not what Jesus had in mind as he was speaking to his disciples and the larger crowd on that day long ago. Instead, I have a horrible feeling that what Jesus meant was that we are to love our enemies by actually wanting what is best for them; wishing them peace, prosperity, and happiness. In fact, I think Jesus even wants us to love our enemies into no longer being enemies – an insight that Noah shared with me yesterday.

Loving our enemies is a pretty tall order – I'm not sure how to do it; I'm not sure I can do it. I'm not sure that I even want to do it. Because being told to love my enemies feels an awful lot like capitulation – like I should accept the hurt they have done as if it didn't matter – as though my loss, my pain, my suffering isn't important. Loving my enemies feels somehow like being revictimized, like repressing my feelings for the benefit of someone who doesn't deserve or appreciate it. It feels like this would only enable further abuse. How can loving my enemies be helpful in any way at all?

Fortunately, Jesus' command to love our enemies is paired with part of Joseph's story in which he did exactly that, so let's see how this is supposed to work.

We remember Joseph; he was the youngest son of Jacob/Israel. Joseph was the favoured baby - a dreamer who kept giving his brothers the impression that he thought he was better than them.

One day when they were far from home the brothers saw their chance to be rid of him; they threw him down a well, and then sold him to some traders who happened by.

In time, Joseph the slave worked his way up until he was the personal assistant to Pharaoh himself, acting on behalf of and speaking for Pharaoh and managing the entire country of Egypt. Joseph was still a slave, but he was in a position that afforded him privilege and power.

And then one day Joseph's brothers showed up, hats in hand, desperate to buy food because there was a widespread drought and famine that was affecting the entire region.

This is every sufferer's dream – to have their enemies come and bow before them in fear and trembling. Haven't we all fantasized about this in one form or another? Being in a position of absolute control over those who have hurt us?

What's better is that the brothers didn't even recognize him. Joseph could have done anything to them: condemned them to a life of slavery, as they had done to him; sent them back home to starve and die in the drought; or even have them killed, just to please himself. They wouldn't have even known why this was happening to them, unless Joseph chose to tell them. Joseph *was* the sword of Damocles, hanging over the heads of his brothers.

So what did he do? How did Joseph exact revenge and punish those who so richly deserved it? Sentence them to slavery; send them back to their father to face slow starvation, or just let them rot in a jail cell for life?

Joseph did none of those things. Joseph forgave his brothers. There were tears, and hugging, and fond remembrances. Joseph could have destroyed his enemies; instead he chose to love his enemies.

Did this revictimize Joseph? Did he have to pretend as though nothing had happened? Did he have to repress his own hurt and anguish? Not at all.

In this particular encounter Joseph reassured his brothers, because they were sore afraid. But when we read a little further we hear Joseph say to his brothers 'what you intended for evil, God has reclaimed for good.' He let them know that what they did was wrong, he didn't whitewash or sugar-coat what they did. Nor did he downplay his own suffering.

There is an honesty that is required for forgiveness. The sin has to be named and recognized before it can be cleansed. Most of the time when we have been victimized there is a denial that takes place. A double denial.

Our tormenters frequently deny their actions, or try to find excuses to minimize what they have done. Victims also tend to retreat into a false world of denial and repression. Often we see the victim and the victimizer co-dependently living in a pretend world that they have constructed together.

Then they become trapped. Each of them is bound to the original act that started the whole mess, and each of them is bound to continuing to maintain whatever false reality they have concocted to paper over the wound.

This is slavery. Both parties are trapped in a poisoned relationship that grinds each of them down.

A few weeks ago we talked about Jesus' mission statement:
The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Breaking the bondage between victim and abuser certainly falls under the category of release to the captives. Jesus wants us to be free.

Here's how freedom looks in practice; love your enemies.

The point that Jesus was making is this: our response to other people is not predicated upon their behaviour. I'm going to say that again - our response to other people is not predicated upon their behaviour.

What that means is that we don't become crappy, petty, spiteful human beings just because someone else has been crappy, petty, or spiteful toward us. That only perpetuates sin – you did something to me, I do something back to you, and on and on it goes, ever escalating until someone is dead.

If we treat our enemies as enemies, if we trade slight for slight with them, we only add to the burden of sin that already rests heavy upon this world. It can only make things worse.

If we look back to Joseph's story, we see that he could have chosen to treat his brothers as they had treated him. Had he done so, he would have taken his suffering and multiplied it by ten – ten other people would suffer what he did. (assuming Benjamin gets a pass since he wasn't born at the time of the original crime.)

But nothing would change for Joseph. Multiplying misery would not change what happened to Joseph – that scar is permanent.

But, when Joseph chose to love his enemies, to truly want what was best for them, he raised the whole family up. The brothers were reunited, they had hope and food for the future. God's kingdom of peace and plenty grew on that day because Joseph made the difficult decision to love his enemy.

That act was an act of power. Joseph decided to no longer be bound by the sin of his brothers, and then he broke the cycle of tit-for-tat. He did not *react*, but instead intentionally acted.

Here's where we go back to the point that our response to other people is not predicated upon their behaviour. If we find ourselves constantly reacting to what other people do we're little more than mollusks. If we only respond to stimuli, we're not autonomous, we're automatic.

God has called us to be so much more. We are to be agents of change in the world – we don't react to stimuli, we *are* the stimuli.

Learning to love our enemies is a way in which we stop being conformed by the world, and start to become what God intends. Confident, capable human beings able to steward creation.

Who do you want to be – or more importantly, who does Jesus want you to be? How about loving, kind, joyful, peaceful, patient, faithful, gentle... Retribution won't help us get there.

Our faith walk is not so much about doing as it is about becoming. We become by doing, so the two are connected, but we need to keep in mind which is the goal and which is the process. If doing is our goal, we are not free. We do the things that we are supposed to do, but in this mode of living we act out of obligation and over time we may become bitter and resentful if we aren't appreciated, or if it seems like others aren't pulling their weight.

If being through doing is our goal, we can't get there if we only react. If we let others pull us down; if we spend our days responding to others in kind, then our doing is not really our doing – it's just a series of responses. Nobody is steering the boat, so we can't attain the state of being that we desire.

Being through doing is only possible through intentional living, which can only be done by free human beings following a vision.

Let me illustrate using an example from this congregation. Most of you know that we give away gift cards for the local Food Basics grocery store to people who come to our doors.

If our goal is simply to do – to give because we are told to give without expectation of return – then over time we will find that we are giving more grudgingly, stingily – we see those in need as a drain on our resources. We wish they would get a job. We start shutting down and shutting others out. Dry legalism will not help us grow.

If we move away from giving through obligation but continue to allow the behaviour of other people to determine our behaviour, then we will have to shut down the program. Some of the people that come abuse our charity; they take the food cards and sell them to buy drugs. It happens; we all know it does.

But, if we let their actions dictate our actions, if we stop helping because of the dishonesty of a few, then no hungry people get helped, and we are not fulfilling God's command to look after our fellow human beings. At that point we are neither doing, nor becoming. Nobody wins.

The third approach, the one that Jesus advocates, is this. Love your enemy. Are the folks that come to the door our enemy? No, they're not. But remember, the main point to understand about loving your enemy is 'don't let the bad actions of other people harden your heart and turn you into something less than you are.' Don't give anyone that kind of power and control over you.

Instead, be intentional about becoming. If the goal is to grow into the kind of people that God is calling us to be, then it doesn't matter what other people are doing. If a few people abuse the program, shame on them. If we abandon our mandate to love our neighbours, then shame on us; we've become pawns of the world.

So what if some people take our money. If our goal is to become generous and learn not to be overly attached to material goods, then there is no loss, only gain. We are becoming the kind of people that God needs in his kingdom, and that is our ultimate goal.

At one time we were all enemies of God – some days I still am. But while we were sinners Jesus came to us, died for us, forgave us. Not because of our actions – because of who and what Jesus is.

Jesus is our role model; Jesus is our goal. Jesus is God personified.

So our focus is not on what other people do. Our focus is to be merciful, as God is merciful. Be gracious, as God is gracious. Be forgiving, as God is forgiving. Be loving, as God is loving. Never let other people distract you from this and make you less than you are, less than what you are to become.

Revenge makes us common. Jesus commands and empowers us to break the cycles of sin and misery, to break the hold that the world holds over us, to act as free and fully realized human beings.

Love your enemies. God does.

Prayer Regarding Critics and Enemies - Serbian Orthodox Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic, whose outspoken criticism of Nazism landed him in Dachau

Bless my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless them and do not curse them.
Enemies have driven me into your embrace more than friends have.
Friends have bound me to earth;
enemies have loosed me from earth
and have demolished all my aspirations in the world.
Enemies have made me a stranger in worldly realms
and an extraneous inhabitant of the world.
Just as a hunted animal finds safer shelter than an unhunted animal does,
so have I, persecuted by enemies, found the safest sanctuary,
having ensconced myself beneath Your tabernacle,
where neither friends nor enemies can slay my soul.
Bless my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless and do not curse them.

They, rather than I, have confessed my sins before the world.
They have punished me, whenever I have hesitated to punish myself.
They have tormented me, whenever I have tried to flee torments.
They have scolded me, whenever I have flattered myself.
They have spat upon me, whenever I have filled myself with arrogance.
Bless my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless them and do not curse them.

Whenever I have made myself wise, they have called me foolish.
Whenever I have made myself mighty, they have mocked me as though I were a [fly].
Whenever I have wanted to lead people, they have shoved me into the background.
Whenever I have rushed to enrich myself, they have prevented me with an iron hand.
Whenever I thought that I would sleep peacefully, they have wakened me from sleep.
Whenever I have tried to build a home for a long and tranquil life,
they have demolished it and driven me out.
Truly, enemies have cut me loose from the world
and have stretched out my hands to the hem of your garment.
Bless my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless them and do not curse them.

Bless them and multiply them;
multiply them and make them even more bitterly against me:
So that my fleeing will have no return;
So that all my hope in men may be scattered like cobwebs;
So that absolute serenity may begin to reign in my soul;
So that my heart may become the grave of my two evil twins: arrogance and anger;
So that I might amass all my treasure in heaven;
Ah, so that I may for once be freed from self-deception,
which has entangled me in the dreadful web of illusory life.

Enemies have taught me to know what hardly anyone knows,
that a person has no enemies in the world except himself.
One hates his enemies only when he fails to realize
that they are not enemies, but cruel friends.
It is truly difficult for me to say who has done me more good
and who has done me more evil in the world: friends or enemies.
Therefore bless, O Lord, both my friends and my enemies.
A slave curses enemies, for he does not understand.
But a son blesses them, for he understands.
For a son knows that his enemies cannot touch his life.
Therefore he freely steps among them and prays to God for them.
Bless my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless them and do not curse them.