

## Sermon on Loving Your Enemies for Epiphany 7, Feb. 20, 2022

There's a couple things I need to say about this passage from the gospel, part of the Sermon on the Plain from Luke (or the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew). First of all, it's really hard. Loving your enemies, doing good to those who hate you, blessing those who curse you, praying for those who persecute you, forgiving people who hurt you: none of these things come naturally to us. If someone is rude or nasty to me, my first natural impulse is not to forgive them and do nice things for them. My first natural impulse is to be rude and nasty back. Pow! So this is really hard.

And Jesus knew that. This whole sermon is full of really hard stuff. This is what we might call a "counsel of perfection," what we do if we want to be just like Jesus. And it is, indeed, what we should be aiming for as Christians. To be like Jesus who forgave his enemies from the cross. But, like learning to do other hard things, this is not going to happen overnight. It is going to take time to grow into. And God is well aware of that. So, if you have ever beaten yourself up because you didn't manage to be forgiving enough, this would be a good time to start practicing how to love and forgive yourself, a good first step.

But indeed, this is a good thing for us all to be working on. Every religion and moral code in the world uses the Golden Rule: treat other people the way you would like to be treated yourself. It's really good advice. Now, I don't suppose most of us have a lot of actual enemies. But let's translate this into terms that might be easier to apply to ourselves. Let's look at the situation with the truckers who were camped out in Ottawa.

Many of them are saying horrible things about Prime Minister Trudeau and the government and doctors and all sorts of people. And many other people, who disagree with the truckers, are saying horrible things about them. And our country is becoming divided. Neighbours, friends, even family members are becoming divided. Those of us on one side of the argument have no idea how the people on the other side could be so deluded and ignorant. And they think the same thing about us. And where is that getting us? Our relationships go down the tubes. I know I have some family members that don't share my opinions about this situation. We don't talk about it. But it's kind of sad.

I think the Golden Rule could well be applied here. What if we saw those people on the other side as people who are perhaps scared by this situation, and worried about their own health and trying to do their best? And that's true of pretty much everyone. What if we saw that they were people like us, with similar desires? And what if we extend the hand of friendship to them? Keep our voices down. Refrain from name calling and cursing (which would right away would really improve the public dialogue). And try to understand each other and see what we have in common. Show some caring and compassion.

In fact, there are a lot of situations in our normal, day to day lives that could be improved if we stopped to apply the Golden Rule. Ask ourselves, "How would I like to be treated if I were that person?" And then do it, even if they don't. This might mean stopping a moment before we immediately react according to our natural impulses. It might take practice. But what an improvement it would make to the world.

Another thing that has to be said, is that Jesus never meant these commandments to be used to oppress people. Unfortunately, that has happened over the years. People who were abusing and oppressing other people then quoted this passage at them to insist that they should forgive and love more. Abusive husbands used this to keep their wives in line. I am very sorry to say that the church often did this, too. Women would tell clergy that they were being abused and they would be told to stay and forgive their husbands and just love them more. So, not only did they have to deal with an abusive husband, but it seemed as if God was on the side of the abuser.

This was absolutely wrong. Jesus would not have said this. I believe he would have directed these commandments to the abusers and told the abused person that she could go to a place of safety if she wanted to, away from her husband, and work on forgiving him from there. And I know this was often not done. If you were ever in this situation and the clergy told you to stay and forgive and love your abuser more, then, as a priest of the church, I apologize to you. I'm so sorry. We were wrong to say that.

Any time someone who is obviously not following these commandments themselves uses them to keep someone else under their power, they are misusing Scripture. Or any time they use them to try to get off scot free and avoid the consequences of their behaviour, you have to be suspicious. If they really thought these commands were important, they would be putting more energy into keeping them themselves and working to heal people they'd hurt.

The thing is that you have to be in a position of freedom to be able to forgive and love. You cannot be forced to love someone or to forgive them. Even God can't force us to love him. Love and forgiveness have to be given freely by someone who is free to give them. Jesus was able to do this because he was essentially free, because he came from a position of great inner strength and great love. We have to be healed and set free before we can follow his example.

The story of Joseph is helpful here. Joseph, by any consideration, was a really spoiled, conceited little brat. He made life miserable for his brothers and strutted around in his coat of many colours. This was mostly his father's fault, not his. He'd been brought up to do that and rewarded for it. .... I still think it was extreme for the brothers to decide to kill him. Fortunately, for all of them, Reuben comes to his senses and sells Joseph into slavery instead. Ah... also extreme, but better than killing him.

And of course, you probably know the story. If not, it's in Genesis 37-47. Joseph is sold as a slave in Egypt and his life of privilege is at an end. But he learns to work hard and he grows up. He ends up in jail for something he didn't do and has plenty of time there to reflect. It would be easy at that point for him to start blaming people, his brothers, his Dad, his previous owner or the owner's wife. But it seems instead he sets himself to the task of getting out and making his way in the world. In other words, taking responsibility for his present situation and working to improve it. And of course, he manages this and ends up as Pharaoh's right hand man, running the country.

By the time the famine has set in and Joseph's brothers come along to buy grain, Joseph is a mature man, and he is a much better person all round. This doesn't stop him from playing some unpleasant games with his brothers, punishing them a bit. But soon he is overcome with love for them and a yearning to see his old Dad again. The brothers are dismayed to discover that the ruler of Egypt is their brother, whom they sold into slavery. They figure they are in deep trouble.

But Joseph says he forgives them. He says that, looking back over his life, he can see the hand of God at work in all that happened, bringing him to this place at this time, so that he could save his family and a lot of other people from famine. There is no bitterness left for him, only love. But that took a lot of time. I believe it took God's constant loving presence within Joseph, healing him of his selfishness and bitterness, helping him grow into love.

Wounds, whether physical, emotional or spiritual, take time to heal. If someone you love hurts you accidentally and says they're sorry, it's not too hard to forgive them. And it feels good. Have you all experienced this? It's a relief and often the relationship is so much stronger afterwards. That has been my experience: often the relationship is deeper and more solid than it was before. Trust is built.

But when the other person has not stopped doing whatever it is, or has not recognised that it has hurt you, even when you've told them, and when they laugh off your pain or take pleasure in it, well, then it's a lot harder to forgive and love. The first thing that's necessary, usually, is to remove yourself from that situation to somewhere safe. And to find some support people who will help you move through the healing and help you to stop blaming yourself. Which we're all inclined to do. Partly because we've been told it's our own fault or for our own good, both of which are false. God actively helps with this.

At some point, when the wounds have been bound up and healed and we have come to a position of strength and true freedom again, we can probably start the work of forgiving and letting go. Which doesn't necessarily mean going back to the situation. What it usually means is seeing the other person with compassion. Realising that they are very broken people, and feeling sad for them. Compassion and empathy are good entryways to love.

When we can see our enemy as a broken human being, like ourselves, it is so much easier to forgive and to love them. It is such a relief when we can finally forgive someone, don't you find? All that hating energy freed up to do something else, that will almost certainly make us much happier. As Jesus says, when we do this, our reward will be great and we will be children of the Most High. In fact, we will be becoming more like Jesus, which is one of the main points of being Christian.

Imagine what it would be like if we and everyone followed the Golden Rule. Wouldn't it make life so much better for all of us? If we didn't judge or condemn and no one judged us. If we forgave and were forgiven. Jesus says, "Give and it will be given to you, good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into our lap; for the measure we give will be the measure we get back." I pray that it will be so for all of us.

