

Sermon: Epiphany 7

The Rev. Mike Wernick

February 24, 2019

Year C

Genesis 45:3-11, 15

Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42

1 Corinthians 15:35-38,42-50

Luke 6:27-38

Who came here today... hoping to be asked... to love your enemies... you know... your political enemies... your religious enemies... maybe the man or woman who fired you... or who took your promotion... the school yard bully who terrorizes your niece or nephew... the neighbor who just won't be quiet... the unknown person or people who spray-painted swastikas on your church... the guy who left a voicemail on the church answering machine saying how you're all going to hell because you love everyone... who came here today... hoping to be asked for that level of love...

But today is also one of those days when we must take our readings with some grace... because they are hard words... they are difficult words... but they are words to which we are called... and to which we can aspire...

Joseph's brothers plan to kill him... and then decide to sell him into slavery... he comes to the home of Potiphar... one of the Pharaoh's officers... he refuses the advances of Potiphar's wife... but she lies about it... and he is thrown into the Pharaoh's jail... he correctly interprets the dreams of the Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker... asks them to put in a good word for him with the Pharaoh... after they get out of the slammer... but they do not... two more years pass... the cupbearer finally remembers Joseph's ability with dreams... when the Pharaoh's dream stumps him... and when Joseph favorably interprets the Pharaoh's dream... he's made second in command... and then... when his brothers come to Egypt... because of famine... hoping to buy food... Joseph's like... it's OK... you intended it for bad... but God intended it for good... I can only imagine the emotional health... the grounding in faith... the grace... that would enable Joseph to respond in this way... I wonder if Pharaoh had a court therapist who helped Joseph

work through all his feelings of betrayal... his trust issues... one commentator wrote... all is well... cue the schmaltzy music... all things work together for good... right... except when they don't...

Thirty-seven year old Kate Bowler lost thirty pounds without trying... and was wracked by stomach pain almost every day... but she went about her life as a professor at Duke Divinity School... she saw doctor after doctor... each one dismissed her concerns... until she finally refused to leave one doctor's office until he actually tried something... dismissive and hostile... he wrote orders for a CT scan while assuring her all her symptoms were psychosomatic... then the results came back... and Kate discovered she had stage four colon cancer... and not much time left to live... but she pulled out all the stops... and got into a clinical trial for an immunotherapy that... at least as of a few weeks ago... has kept her cancer at bay...

In an interview made last March... she and her husband Tobin spoke about their faith... about not being angry at God... and about knowing with certainty... God's love... Tobin said... look at what happened to Jesus... and the disciples... why should I think nothing bad will happen to us... and Kate said... she wants an honest conversation about suffering... her NY Times bestseller book is titled... Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved... but she said... everything happens... period...

I wonder what kinds of lies we tell ourselves... about how things should be... or how they shouldn't be... what pre-conceived notions do we inherit... that keep God's fullness from us... what litmus tests do we create... although it's true that... *it is what it is*... that doesn't mean it can't be better... that there's no room for improvement... to end suffering... to increase justice... so there's more kindness... more forgiveness... for the things that God values... to be on the rise... but it's we who must choose the better... and not just believe that we can simply think it all into being... we must will ourselves into action to make things better...

Nelson Mandela was a South African anti-apartheid revolutionary... and insurgent... like Jesus was... on June 11, 1964 he and seven others... were convicted of sabotage... and sentenced to life imprisonment... but on February 11, 1990... nine days after the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress were unbanned... Mandela was released from prison... in 1993... he and President FW de Klerk jointly won the Nobel Peace Prize... and on April 27, 1994... he voted for the first time in his life... he served as President of South Africa from 1994 to 1999... he was the country's first black head of state... and the first one elected in a fully representative democratic election... he swam upstream... against torrents of vitriol... to create a level playing field for blacks in South Africa... and he forgave those who hated him...

Today's continuation of the Sermon on the Plain... where everyone is physically on the same level... has Jesus saying some things that seem pretty far out there...

Fr. John Shea writes... these injunctions *appear* staggeringly stupid... and they go beyond the common sense law of reciprocity... Jesus said... do unto others as you'd have them do unto you... but what Jesus really meant... Shea wrote... was do unto others... no matter what they do to you... it would *seem*... that loving enemies just gives them a chance to hit you one more time... doing good to those who hate you is codependency at best and masochism at worst... it seems that giving to everyone who begs means that you will soon become a beggar and find out that most people don't give to those who beg... and to top it off... helping the robber... means that if he takes your coat... you might as well hand him your shirt as well...

But this is not spiritual naiveté... it is theological courage of the highest order... and it rises up from the realization that God is love... and if we are in touch with this loving God... who cannot be anything but love... then neither can we be anything but love... and it is this inner relationship to God... that determines how we choose to behave in response to others... no matter what they do... or don't do...

Jesus is messing with the norms... Jesus knows that most of the time... for most people... when we threaten our enemies... it only emboldens them to more horrific tactics... most of the time... for most people... doing good to those who hate us... may not only drive them crazy... but may move them from hateful thoughts to hateful actions... violence almost always... just begets more violence...

Pastor Karoline Lewis wrote... what Jesus calls us to... is not a competition... or the means by which to compare our discipleship to others... nor is this a mandate for living our best life now... but instead... she wrote... I believe these words of Jesus are but a vision for what is possible... for what should be... were we to have Jesus' sermon at Nazareth in mind... or Mary's Magnificat...

I don't think we can fully embody the Gospel... without also healing from our family of origin woundedness... and Lord knows... we all have some kind of wounds... some kind of hurts... and sometimes like Kate Bowler... we are not likely to find cures for the dis-eases we have... but that doesn't mean we can't be healed...

There's a Sufi story... Jesus was walking down the road with his disciples... some people threw stones at him and cursed him... Jesus blessed them... the disciples asked him... Master... why do you bless those who curse you... Jesus answered... I can give only what I have in my purse... the lesson... Shea says... is that those of us who are not securely conscious of our deeper... loving... unitive identity with God... may be unable... sometimes... to find our purse... but a hateful word... or a rock... seems always to be at hand...

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