

The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C – February 23, 2025

“Love Your Enemies”

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ST. PAUL’S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

VERGENNES, VERMONT

Genesis 45:3-11, 15 | Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42 | 1 Corinthians 15:35-38,42-50 | Luke 6:27-38

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” Is this passage from today’s Gospel asking us to love those who abuse innocent people? I believe so, and like every other passage in the Bible, its full meaning become clear when we read the verses before and after it.

The teaching is part of the Luke’s Sermon on the Plain. Jesus looks up at his disciples and says, “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.” Then, he shares the greatest blessing: “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; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.”

To make sure that the disciples get his point, he reverses the lesson, “Woe to you who are rich, who are full now, who are laughing now, and when all speak well of you...”

Jesus is preparing his disciples for the challenges ahead. Like him, they will be hated, excluded, reviled and defamed. They will be hungry. They will weep. They will be aware of the world around them, but not be of the world.

As disciples ourselves, why are we called to love those who would harm us and others? There are two reasons. The first is that loving people who love us and do good to us is easy. It takes no effort. Anyone can do that. The second takes a while to digest. Jesus says, because you

are children of God, love your enemies, do good, and lend them money, and expect nothing in return, because God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Jesus calls on the disciples to be good even to those who hate them and would harm them, **because that's what God does**. Be merciful, Jesus says, because God is merciful to all of us...to all of us.

Why are we supposed to love those who would hate and harm us? Because God is kind to them. God is merciful, and so we are called to be merciful, too. The way to stop hating is to stop judging. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you."

Before we consider how this teaching applies to the real world, how many of you know the Lord of the Rings by JRR Tolkien or saw the movies? Who is the biggest enemy, the Dark Lord who desires the Ring of Power so he can control all of Middle Earth? Who is the hero of the story? It happens that a very unlikely character, small, humble, gentle, peaceful Frodo Baggins, a Hobbit half the size of a human, volunteers to take the Ring of Power to destroy it. On his journey, Frodo finds out that a creature called Gollum revealed to the enemy that Frodo has the Ring. Terrified. Frodo says of Gollum, "He deserves death." He knows that this information would lead the Dark Lord's army to his home. It doesn't matter to Frodo that the enemy had tortured Gollum to get this information. It doesn't matter that Gollum's desire for the Ring made him sick and ruined his life. None of that matters to Frodo. In his panicked state, Frodo sees Gollum as an enemy, and wishes him dead.

The wizard Gandalf replies, "Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment. For even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that

Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill...” What Gandalf’s heart tells him turns out to be true. I won’t spoil the ending, but it’s at the end of Chapter 3 in the Return of the King. After that, Frodo focuses only on destroying the Ring. At the end, Frodo tells Sam it is time to forgive Gollum.

Returning to today’s Gospel. “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you.” The most humble, gentle character in the story shows compassion to a perceived enemy and saves Middle Earth.

Tolkien’s lesson seems to be not to hate, not to retaliate. This is a foundational Christian teaching—not to judge, to show mercy, but the piece about love seems to be missing from Tolkien’s story. As Christians, we are called to suspend judgment, not to condemn, to show mercy and to love our enemies **because God loves them and will show them mercy**. Jesus revealed the true nature of our God. God is not waiting for us to do wrong or keeping score. God loves us and is waiting to forgive us—all of us.

I could only think of one actual leader who taught his followers to love their enemies—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In nonviolent resistance, love takes a particular form, *agape*. This approach involves looking to win the “friendship and understanding” of the opponent, not to humiliate, condemn, and hate (King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 1958; 84). The injustice itself is opposed, not the people committing unjust acts. Those committed to nonviolent action must be willing to suffer without retaliation because suffering can be redemptive. Nonviolent resistance avoids “external physical violence” as well as “internal violence of spirit.”

Dr. King wrote: “The nonviolent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent but he also refuses to hate him” (85). The resister should be motivated by love in the sense of ‘understanding,’ or ‘redeeming good will’ for all people” (86). Dr. King told an audience in Selma to meet the anger of the white man with an even deeper love...Agape transcends affection; you love everyone because God loves everyone, because “Christ died for the segregationist as well as the integrationist.”

The rapid changes we experience now feel random, chaotic, distracting. Our response, then, should be to be focus on God’s love for us and our enemies until returning love becomes a habit. This is Jesus’ teaching, a form of Christian resistance to the world, that we can practice today.

The questions are always the same: what will we do, which path will we choose, and in which world will we live?

Echoing St. Francis, let us pray: Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Let us return hatred with love, anger with patience, fear with reassurance, bad credit with generosity, injury with forgiveness, injustice with mercy, and violence with peace. Amen.