
Be Merciful, Said Jesus

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany – Year C**

Jesus said, 'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 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. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? ...But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

'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. 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.' (Luke 6:27-38)

Most of you understand that our church does not choose bible passages randomly to be read each Sunday. The Bible passages that we hear each Sunday appear in a long-standing lectionary, a schedule of bible readings, that has a long tradition. With our scheduled lectionary, we hear the wide span of most of the bible over three years.

So we must struggle with the lessons assigned to us each week, whatever they are. This week, I, the preacher, sure have struggled. This gospel passage, the difficult bible passage this week, collides with much of the world has been hearing this week.

The world around us has been hearing judgement and false witness. Distortion and vengeance. Retaliation and crude transaction in relationships.

We come to church, and we hear another story. First, today, we hear about Joseph, and his brothers. Do you remember the basic outline of that story, how the brothers of Joseph envied him and sold him away? Joseph ended up, however, a great man in distant Egypt, in charge of food when the world was in famine. His guilty brothers journey over to Egypt to plead for food, expecting Joseph to retaliate. They expect Joseph to take vengeance. After all, that was the accepted way of political, and even personal, relationships then. Some say it is the accepted way of political and even personal relationships even now.

But Joseph changes the story. "I am Joseph, your brother!" exclaims Joseph (Genesis 45:4), and he refuses to exact vengeance upon the very people who had sold him away. And then Joseph cares for them; Joseph cares for those who were hungry and in need.

In our lectionary story from Genesis today, we glimpse a different kind of leadership. Joseph is great because he does not retaliate. Joseph does not lead by retaliation. Joseph does not lead with vengeance. Joseph leads with care and generosity, and even love.

These days, does the world around us show us any leadership like that? I struggle.

Next, our lectionary gospel for today presents Jesus continuing this different kind of story. This text from the

Gospel of Luke continues from last week with some quite difficult commandments. Most of us who come to church have heard them before; and we have struggled with them. Most of us realize that we fall short of these tough sayings: "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also. Give to everyone who begs from you."

I, the preacher today, did not make up those words. Jesus did. Again, most of us have heard those words before, but we return to church to hear them again. We do not avoid them.

If we are Christian, no matter what our role is in life, we are committed to hearing those words and acting on them. We might be the mother or father of a family. We might be a teacher or a lawyer. We might be a business person or a writer. We might be a politician, or even the President of the United States.

No matter who we are, each of us hears, equally, these words of Jesus today: "Love your enemies. Do not judge. ..." And, finally, in the midst of all these challenging statements, we hear that word, "mercy." "Be merciful," said Jesus. "Be merciful, as your father in heaven is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

It was the same word that the leader, Joseph, heard in his heart, way back in the Book of Genesis. "Be merciful."

I struggle with mercy. How do I have mercy, when I am at the same time asking someone to have mercy?

How do I show mercy to someone who seems to have no idea what mercy is?

How do I speak mercy to someone who prides himself on retaliation and vengeance?

It is hard to be a Christian. The brave Christian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who lived in the Germany of the 1930s and 1940s, knew it was hard. Not everything being said of Bonhoeffer these days is morally accurate; but his little book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, remains outstanding and hard (it is a commentary on Jesus's Sermon on the Mount.)

He says there, "Judging others makes us blind, whereas love is illuminating. By judging others we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*).

Still, how do we show mercy when leaders around us are speaking obvious untruth?

"Be merciful." I don't know how military generals do it. They believe they have to retaliate. I don't know how bellicose politicians do it. They think they have to play "tit-for-tat."

But, one cannot deny the words of Jesus in today's gospel. In whatever position of the world you are in, you – and I—must deal with the words of Jesus. And these words from Jesus are plain. Love your enemies. Show mercy.

Well, over time, the history of retaliatory behavior will prevail. One cannot successfully lead by retaliation. One cannot successfully lead by vengeance. History repeats this principle, again and again. That style of leadership shrinks one's leadership.

"I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt!" Joseph does not lead by retaliation. Joseph does not lead by vengeance. Joseph leads with mercy. That style of leadership expands one's leadership.

Again, I didn't come up with the words of Jesus. I didn't make them up. But I sure am attracted to those words. When the world starts accepting lies and untruths, I am attracted to the truth more and more. And I am attracted to the truth of Jesus.

The Ten Commandments – which some people these days seem to be interested in using as a poster in a classroom—these Ten Commandments actually mean something. They say things like, "Worship God alone," which is hard enough. For sure. But they also say things like, "Do not bear false witness."

Do you know what false witness is? False witness is accusing your neighbor of something that is not true. Falsely accusing your neighbor. Saying that your neighbor started the argument, when it was really you. Falsely saying that somebody started a war when they didn't. The Ten Commandments say, "Don't do that." Thou shalt not bear false witness.

We gather in church, week after week, to hear another story. We gather in church, week after week, to remind

ourselves of true witness. We gather in church to remind ourselves of Joseph, who did not lead by retaliation. We gather in church to remind ourselves of what Jesus said, "Be merciful." If you do not want to hear the phrase, "Have mercy," then don't come to church. We use that phrase often.

Jesus told still another story, one day, about a tax collector, a government worker who was despised by the local people. In that story, Jesus said that a tax collector went away from prayer justified, in contrast to a pompous self-righteous Pharisee, because the tax collector was humble. The tax collector had prayed, "Have mercy on me."

And God did have mercy. Jesus says that is how we should behave, no matter who we are. Whether we are an ordinary citizen or whether we are the president of a country: "Be merciful." I, Sam Candler, did not come up with those words.

It was Jesus who came up with those words. But I sure am attracted to those words. They are why I come to church. When I can make even a small step towards mercy, my life is changed into joy! When I can make even a small act of love, my life is changed into love!

"Forgive," said Jesus, "and you will be forgiven; 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."

"Be merciful," said Jesus, "as your father in heaven is merciful."

AMEN.

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