

EPIPHANY VII – 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.
Amen.

We have just heard Jesus give his command to his disciples: “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.” Of course, he says that to us, too. Jesus says it to anyone who listens, hoping and praying that we all will. Jesus reduces this to one simple sentence: “Do unto others as you would have them do to you.” Jesus understands deeply that we all want to be loved, so there is little wonder that he wants us to begin the loving.

This is a tall order, and as some of us are learning, we can only grow into such loving one day at a time.

There are a number of ways Jesus looks at this. When we are under attack from others, he is suggesting that we take it, that we neither run away in fright nor strike back in anger and accelerate the conflict. We know how hard that is. Who among us wants to turn the other cheek and take another punch in the jaw? We want to defend ourselves or get the heck out of there. And that’s not just a personal dynamic. That’s exactly what is happening on the international stage in Ukraine right now. Instead of attacking before the Russians do, the NATO forces, including our troops, are waiting and restraining themselves from any precipitous action. Some describe that as a cowardly stance, but others are seeing that as the greatest show of strength and confidence that we can make. Unlike a personal affront, this will not be

a time when NATO will turn the other cheek. There are different conditions and limits when it is a matter of warfare that will take hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of lives. But our President and other world leaders are exercising the restraint that Jesus advocates. This is not the same as a personal conflict in a very significant way: after turning the other cheek, if the bully still wants to harm us, we can always leave and go home and let the bully find another way to get rid of all that rage he is carrying around. The bully is impotent when there is no one to beat up. The difference here is that the Ukrainians have nowhere to go. They are at home, and it is their home that the Russian bully wants. So, it seems that the strategy here is to show up the bully on the world stage for what he is, and give him no opportunity to look good, no opportunity to justify his actions of aggression as a matter of defense. This may not work; he may still attack and disrupt much of the world. The bully has nursed his anger for thirty years, since the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. That's a long time to be angry, to carry a grudge, to let it smolder. That's a long time to be self-justifying about one's anger, to keep on adding to the reasons why it is OK for millions of people to die, as his idea of a fitting way to right what he thinks was a wrong done to his people in the past. Never mind that his country—like all powerful countries who have gotten lazy, self-serving, and arrogant—his country imploded, disintegrated, fell apart due to their own greed, their own isolation, their own self-deception. This is a helpful mirror for us to look into, given the willingness of so many people in our country to ignore the awful reality of the insurrection last January 6th. Our self-deception may risk that same kind of implosion and disintegration.

Jesus talks about this on a personal level, not a national one, and yet our very society, through legislation and court decisions, has decided that corporations and organizations have the same rights as citizens;

they may seek to persuade or bribe legislators to move the country in ways that benefit them—not the greater good, but their bottom line. If they are given the same rights, then it seems entirely appropriate that they take the same moral responsibility, a responsibility for the greater good, not just their own.

Jesus goes further with his description of giving: giving away clothing, not only our coat, but our shirt, too. Giving away some income, not just lending money but also not taking the interest that would be expected for using that money. And most of all, giving away forgiveness.

Perhaps there is nothing that we have that is more valuable than our forgiveness. I think that deep down we know that, for we know that to forgive someone costs us plenty—not usually money, but we have to let go of the satisfaction of believing that we are right; we have to let go of the pride of thinking ourselves better than the other. To forgive someone is to proclaim that a relationship is more important than self-justification.

Let's back up a little bit, actually quite a bit, all the way to the earliest period of Hebrew scripture and history. This week the story in Genesis seems to be precisely about what Jesus wants to happen when there is a great wound, even when great harm has been done. Joseph—no matter how vain he may have been as a boy when he bragged about his dreams and showed off his flashy coat to his ten older brothers—Joseph did not deserve to die from their rage. Reuben, the oldest brother, knew that. He also seemed to think that it would be better if Joseph were just out of the way, so why not do two things at the same time by selling Joseph into slavery: the new owners would take him away, and the brothers would make a little pocket money on top of it. That's what they did, and Joseph lost everything: home, family, freedom. When he was sold to Pharaoh, things started to look good, until Pharaoh's wife tried to seduce him, and he refused. In her anger,

she turned the tables and spoke to her husband, making Joseph look guilty, and he went to jail, presumably to be killed. But Joseph had a talent for dreaming, dreams that had present-day meaning, and a pair of them predicted a severe drought and famine in Egypt. Due to his cleverness at management, Joseph was put in charge of the FEMA of his day, and so ordered and regulated the affairs of the country, that the Egyptians were able to more than survive by caring for their resources and sharing them equitably. No fights or insurrection broke out.

We don't know where in Joseph's heart he carried his anger toward his brothers, but he still had a good bit of it smoldering within him when he saw his brothers that first time coming to Egypt to buy food. He was glad to see them, but he was also willing to cause them some pain, by setting up the ruse that they had stolen from him and therefore owed him something. When Joseph insisted that they bring his younger brother Benjamin back with them when they came for more grain, he knew that would cause them great anguish because they were aware their father Jacob would fear dying without ever seeing Benjamin again. His brothers, in greater fear of Joseph, did what he commanded. They did not realize that they were bowing down to him as in Joseph's dream about their subservience during their childhood—the very dream that angered them in the first place. Joseph was getting some satisfaction out of that. They were suffering anguish and fear, just as he had, if not to the same degree or in the same circumstances.

I've always marveled at what happened to Joseph. He had this little drama going with his brothers. He could have become absolutely vengeful, murderously vengeful, if he continued on this path of exercising his authority and raw power over them. We don't really know what changed Joseph, we simply know that he was changed. There was something in seeing them again that reminded him more of what? Of family? Of home? Of belonging to others again? Joseph was

so overcome with emotion that he had to go off into another room. He sobbed so loudly the Egyptians heard him, not understanding what this was all about. I think Joseph's feelings moved from anger to grief, grief for all the years lost to him and them in loving each other, in being one with one another. When we are angry, we put up internal barriers, holding onto the anger so forcefully that no one can budge us from it; so that love cannot pierce through and enter our hearts again. I have often heard people say, "I'll never forgive him for that." When we grieve, however, we are not hard-hearted but vulnerable, and love can get in and open us up again.

Love opened Joseph to put a new description on his story with his brothers: he now saw this as God's will, not theirs, and therefore Joseph believed that good could come of it. What greater good is there than being rejoined to one another in love? That gift was for all of them. The brothers were given absolution. They could admit they were wrong, yet give thanks that God found a way of grace for all of them, even after many years. Joseph was restored to his family, and since raw anger pushes our true self away, Joseph was even restored to himself. And Jacob, the father of all of them, a man who was pretty nasty to his own brother, and known to be unscrupulous with others, Jacob got to live his last days in internal peace and within the harmony of his sons.

In Jesus' mind and heart, forgiveness is all about freedom, not just for those who are forgiven, but especially for those who forgive. In Jesus' teaching, this is all about learning to live and love in a new way, facing our past and present selves squarely and moving toward a better, more loving self. In Jesus' own life, and in his dying, he left no one of us hostage to his or her past; Jesus left all of us free. *Amen.*

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