

Epiphany 07 C 2022
February 20, 2022 :: Luke 6:27-39 & Genesis 45:3-11, 15
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“Our Guiding Moral Principles.”

Perhaps no other command from Jesus has caused more confusion and consternation than what we heard at the beginning of our gospel, when Jesus said, “Love your enemies.” I mean, is he serious? And, if so, what does that even look like?

Well, and without going into a lot of detail, I’ll just posit that, in this context, the command to “love” is not a command to *feel* something, but rather a command to *do* something. And, in fact, Jesus tells us what he wants us to do, in what he says next.

That is, you are loving your enemy when you “do good to those who hate you.” You are loving your enemy when you “bless those who curse you.” And, you are loving your enemy when you “pray for those who abuse you.”

And I thank God for those words of explanation, because they transformed something that sounded impossible, into something that sounds actually feasible. In other words, loving our enemies is something that we *can* do!

And what's more, in this passage, Jesus has revealed two important things about the guiding moral principles for any Christian's behavior.

The first thing, is that a Christian's behavior is marked by the Christian *doing things* that are positive and helpful — as opposed to the Christian *not doing things* that are negative and harmful. There's a difference, and I'll get to that in a moment.

But did you notice the Golden Rule in the middle of our gospel reading? You know, it didn't originate with Jesus. In fact, there have been many religious leaders and philosophers and teachers — a lot of whom came long *before* Jesus — many who have offered up something very similar.

But here's the thing: In almost every one of those other examples, their rule was offered in the negative form, for example: *Don't do* to others what you don't want them to do to you.

But Jesus turns that rule on its head, and offers it in the positive form: "*Do* to others as you would have them do to you."

And that difference is really important. Because, while it's not especially hard to stop yourself from doing something bad to someone else, it's a whole other thing entirely when you've been told to go out of your way to do something good for someone else. In other words, and for the Christian, *we are to set the example* for the behavior we want to see in others.

And so, that's the first thing that Jesus revealed about the guiding moral principles for any Christian's behavior. The second thing that Jesus revealed, is based on what some scholars call "the extra thing." Let me explain.

In the second paragraph of our gospel reading, Jesus offered up a few examples of some commonsense behavior, things like: Loving those who love us; and doing good to those who do good to us; and lending money to those who we know will pay us back. And while doing such things makes sense, the real question is: As Christians, does doing these sorts of things really set us apart from everyone else? *No!* Because, as Jesus put it in our gospel reading: "For even sinners do the same."

No, the hallmark of true Christian behavior, is doing that “extra thing”: to love, to do good, and to lend — even to people whom we think don’t deserve it — and to do so *expecting nothing in return*. That’s the extra thing.

Now, the obvious question to ask, after having heard all this, is the question “Why? Why should we do this? Why should we go to all this extra effort?”

The answer that Jesus offers to us, at the end of that second paragraph, is this: Because that’s how we live into the fullness of our humanity — into the fullness of men and women created in the image and likeness of God.

And what is this God of ours like? Luke has Jesus describing God as someone who “is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” And Matthew’s gospel has Jesus describing God as someone who “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (5:45). In other words, it’s in the very fabric of our design — it’s in our DNA, if you will — to be people who are forgiving, and generous, and kind.

And when we can manifest those attitudes and behaviors in our lives — when we live lives marked by forgiveness, generosity, and kindness — that’s when our lives becomes what Jesus elsewhere describes as “abundant.”

Fortunately, we’ve been given a really good example of the sort of person that Jesus has been talking about. His name was Joseph, and we heard a snippet from the very end of his story in our reading from Genesis. But I want to give you the “Reader’s Digest version” of Joseph’s fuller story, to help us really appreciate what’s going on in that reading.

Joseph was the youngest of the twelve sons of Jacob. In fact, he was Jacob’s favorite, and so he got lots of really neat gifts from his dad. For that reason, and others, Joseph’s eleven brothers are really jealous of him. To the point of hating him. And so they devise a plan to get rid of Joseph. One day, they snatch him up and sell him to a caravan of traders, who take Joseph to Egypt, where he is sold to be the slave of a high ranking official in Pharaoh’s palace.

But Joseph proves to be smart and adept, and — long story short — he ends up serving as Pharaoh’s second-in-command; essentially as the Chief Operating Officer over the nation of Egypt. And Joseph is so good at his job that, when a seven-year-long famine hits that whole region, Egypt is prepared, with plenty of provisions stored up.

But back home in Canaan, however, the rest of Joseph’s family is running out of food. So Jacob, Joseph’s father, sends his eleven remaining sons to Egypt to purchase some of those provisions. And when the eleven arrive in Egypt, they are confronted by the brother they sold into slavery. And that’s where our reading from Genesis picks up. And what did Joseph do and say? Let me remind you of what we heard earlier. Joseph said:

“I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life ... So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh... and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

“Hurry and go up to my father and say to him,
‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made
me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do
not delay. You shall settle in the land of
Goshen, and you shall be near me ... [and] I
will provide for you there ... so that you and
your household, and all that you have, will
not come to poverty.’”

That’s an amazing story! However, and admittedly, many years have passed between the brothers’ original betrayal of Joseph in Canaan, and their reunion in Egypt. So, everyone has had a lot of time to think about what transpired. And with the passage of that time, the brother’s feelings of anger and jealousy have been transformed into repentance and regret. And Joseph’s feelings of anger and betrayal have been transformed into forgiveness and generosity.

It’s really a great story. But that brings me to a couple of final thoughts.

First, if I try to imagine that I'm Joseph, and that I went through what he went through, I have a hard time believing that there is enough time on earth *even for God* to transform my feelings of anger and betrayal into forgiveness and generosity. I just don't know if I'm up to the task. And maybe you feel the same way. But the point of the story in Genesis, and the point of Jesus' words in Luke, is that *we at least have to try*.

And why is that? Because the story in Genesis, and the words of Jesus in Luke, are describing for us *the way that God behaves!* They are describing the way that God responds to our actions. They are describing how a part of God's Rule of Life is something that St. Paul described in his letter to the Ephesians:

“Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” (4:26).

And as the people of God, we've got to put forth at least *some* effort in trying to behave like God.

I'm pretty sure I've shared part of this story with y'all, but I'll recap it for you very briefly. The parish I served in Kansas had five

members who were making my life miserable. Finally, I took to heart what Jesus said in our gospel reading: I started to pray for them. I'm sure my heart wasn't it, at least not initially, and sometimes my prayers were offered reluctantly. But I prayed for them for a long time. Eventually, I was reconciled with one of them. Unfortunately, the other four decided to attend another church.

But that experience taught me the wisdom behind Jesus commanding us to *do* something, rather than *feel* something. Because it taught me that, sometimes, just going through the motions is enough to give God room to work.

And my final thought, is that the story in Genesis, and the words of Jesus in Luke, remind us that, even though we can't always control what happens to us in life, we do have a say in how we are going to respond. And what Jesus suggests we do, is to "be merciful, just as [our] Father is merciful," because "the measure [we] give will be the measure [we] get back."

Amen.