

Sermon for the 7th Sunday after Epiphany

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Killeen, Texas

February 24, 2019

Jesus says, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who persecute you, turn the other cheek, don't look to get your stuff back when somebody takes it, and whenever somebody wants your shirt, give him your coat too.

These are even tougher commandments than the original Ten in stone that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. I mean, it's easier for us to resist stealing, lying, mistreating our parents, practicing idolatry or even being adulterous. *Much* easier than loving our enemies and doing good to people who hurt us. The Ten Commandments tell us to avoid some things we can reasonably get by without, while the marching orders of Jesus fly in the face of all reason.

So, I guess it's a good thing we have the story of Joseph and his brothers paired up with this gospel in today's readings. Joseph's experience lies at the foundation of Jesus' way of seeing things. It's worth taking a close look at his story.

The first half of Joseph's story is familiar from many Sunday School re-enactments. Joseph is his daddy's favorite son, so naturally his brothers are insanely jealous. When Joseph wears the special coat dad gave him out into the fields, it's just too much for the brothers. They smack him over the head and throw him into a hole in the ground where it looks like they mean to bury him alive. About this plan, however, they have second thoughts, so instead they give him to a caravan that is conveniently passing by on its way to Egypt. They take Joseph's special coat, now covered in blood, back to dad and tell him his favorite kid is dead, too bad, end of story.

In case you miss the point, *these are not nice people*. Joseph's enemies, the guys Jesus would have him love and pray for, are his own brothers. He has every reason to hate them for all of eternity, and want nothing more than revenge.

Well, as it turns out, Joseph did OK in Egypt. He had some special spiritual gifts that raised him up from slavery and made him Pharaoh's right-hand man. He did that by figuring out economics so well that Egypt had abundant supplies of food stored up at the same time that everybody else in the countries nearby were starving. Joseph now has the power of life and death over just about everybody who doesn't live along the Nile River.

Which brings us to the part of the story from today's scripture, the part that doesn't usually get re-enacted in Sunday School.

Joseph's family-of-origin may have been bloody-minded, but that didn't make them economic geniuses, so they're starving up in Canaan because of the famine. They hear there's plenty of food in Egypt. So daddy sent the brothers down to Egypt, along with all the other refugees from the famine, where they find themselves dealing with—who else?—Pharaoh's right hand man. Before this all-powerful figure, they grovel so forcefully that can't get their faces up off the floorboards, so they fail to recognize their own brother. When Joseph finally makes them stand up, it must have been their worst nightmare. Here is the man they beat up, threw in a pit, disinherited and sold into

slavery – oh, and where’s my nice coat guys? And he has the power of life and death over them.

This is the moment Jesus cares about. This is the moment Jesus is talking about in the gospel. In fact, what Joseph does next is so important that it’s a turning point in human history.

What does he do? He could easily have them thrown in a pit, put them into chains, and sent their bloody clothes back to old dad in Canaan where he’s waiting for them to get home with the groceries. Instead of Meals on Wheels, however, he would get word that now *all* his sons are dead. Not good news.

But something in Joseph has changed over the years. He was known for having visions, so maybe he had some visions that opened him up to another way of seeing things. He had been incredibly fortunate that things, so bad in the beginning, had worked out so well for him, so maybe he learned that the world could be forgiving, and maybe he should be too. Or maybe blood really is thicker than water and, after years of being a stranger in a strange land, he was just happy to see his family again.

We don’t really know what Joseph’s motivations were. It doesn’t matter. What matters is what he did. He looked at his brothers, face-down on the floor in front of him, and he loved them. He loved his enemies. He made them stand up and look him in the eye and face up to what they’d done to him. But then he gave them food. He gave them places to live. He had them bring daddy down from Canaan so that they could live happily ever after in Egypt. Wow.

Would you have done that? Is this somebody you see as a role model? Or do you think guys like Joseph are just chumps? I don’t know. That’s up to you to sort out. But, since my job is to try to tell you what Jesus has in mind, I see three takeaways from this story that we all ought to think about.

First, when you treat an enemy like an enemy, you become an enemy. If Joseph had thrown his brothers into prison or had them killed, he would have done exactly what they did to him. He would have become a “brother” exactly like them...hateful, vicious, bloody. But that’s just not who he was. Joseph was the guy who distributed the wealth of Egypt to starving foreigners to save their lives, not the guy who assaults and sells his own brothers into slavery. He knows firsthand how bad it is to be his brothers, and that’s just not who he wants to be.

This is a tough lesson, but I think there’s some truth to it. If you hate the haters, you become a hater. When you tie yourself emotionally to what you despise, all those negative things that were done to you have a way of filling up your head. You become what you know to be awful because you’ve been on the receiving end of people just like that. I think Jesus doesn’t want that to happen to you.

Second, treating an enemy only as an enemy denies relationship its opportunity to heal things between you. I know when you’re angry over being mistreated that relationship words like patience or empathy or affection sound flimsy, but think about Joseph. He has family feelings for these brothers of his who have hated him in the past, and he clearly wants those family feelings to transform his brothers into real *brothers*. It’s not just that he’s got the food and they don’t. It’s that he has the love and they don’t yet, but can they? Will they? Well, not a chance in the world if he doesn’t trust them a little. If he doesn’t trust love to maybe heal things between them. If he doesn’t try.

Again, this is a tough lesson if you apply it to your enemies. What I believe Jesus is asking you to think about is how to appeal to what you have in common with your enemy. In Joseph's case, it was family, being brothers. For you and your enemy, it may be family, but it could also be a shared commitment to a workplace, or this church, or your neighborhood or civic pride, or our nation, or just our shared humanity. What I believe Jesus wants us do is to resist speaking and acting with harsh, adversarial language, but rather to deploy language that appeals to solving conflict in the name of shared concerns. Maybe doing that over a period of time. Then trusting shared humanity between you and another heart, however hardened it might seem, to heal. Some.

Third, being an enemy to your enemies closes off any possible good future. I haven't used too many names so far in recalling Joseph's story for you, but they do matter. So let me remind you that the daddy of all these brothers was named Israel. These dysfunctional brothers were the named forebears of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Their names are on pieces of real estate all up and down the country we call Israel, named for daddy. If Joseph had let them starve, or even if Joseph had just treated them like a bunch of jerks and not turned their hearts around, they would never have become the kind of people who could found nations. Joseph had the power to kill the future, but he didn't, and everything else follows from that including Jesus and you and me.

So, bear that in mind as you reflect on how to treat your enemies. If you exchange cruelty for cruelty with them, I guarantee nothing good will follow because you have killed the future. But if you are able to bridge the bitter gulf between you, I guarantee you will be astonished at the good that will follow. Note carefully, I'm not guaranteeing that you will be able to bridge that gulf, but I will guarantee that great things will follow if the two of you figure out how to get closer to one another. And that won't happen if you don't try.

This is all tough stuff. We are absolutely at the point where human nature grinds its gears and gets sand in its gears and jams its gears. There's nothing easy about enemies. Jesus knows how tough it is – recall that he got crucified for trying (but also recall the incredible future he opened up).

But for all the folks in your world, for the disagreeable people who have set themselves up as your enemies...what thoughts and possibilities might open up for you if you take Jesus seriously when he urges you to find a way to love them?

The Rev. David Hoster