

Rev. Dr. David Holyan

“Do Unto Others”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, February 24, 2019

Genesis 45:3-1

Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?' But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me.' And they came closer. He 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. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house 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, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have."

Luke 6:27-38

'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? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. 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.'

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that each of us are carrying within us now, the words that we offer in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read from Genesis and the Gospel of Luke, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these words into the word of Christ, and feed us this day. Feed our hearts and our souls and our minds. Let the word of Christ be alive within us, among us, and through us. And may we all be at peace in Christ's name. Amen.

So earlier this week, I printed out the passages that would be read for a worship this Sunday. I headed off to my favorite Vietnamese suit place up on all of Boulevard. I ordered phone number, [one?], sat down, and began to look at the text. And what I had decided months and months and months ago to preach on was the golden rule. Do unto others as you would have them do to you. I had bolded it. I had put a box around it, a big exclamation point. This is it. And yet as I sat there and really started to look at the text and let it speak to me, I realized that maybe, as I said in the children's sermon, we've gotten a bit wrong. Maybe the golden rule isn't to love our neighbors like ourselves. And maybe it's not do unto

others as you would have them do to you because the others that Jesus lists in this passage, we wouldn't want them-- we wouldn't want what they would do to us to be offered back to them.

Let me try this again. Jesus says love, do good, bless, pray, and give. That sounds wonderful and easy, and it is what we do as a congregation. We embody those things: loving our neighbors, doing good, blessing those who need a blessing, praying for those who are hurting, giving to those in need. In fact, this past Friday night, we had to name that Tune Event here in fellowship hall, a fundraiser for a local mission for Kirkwood every child promise. I came thinking it would be a good chance to mingle among congregants and to say hi to all of you and to have a chance to chat, and I walked into fellowship hall, and I immediately realized that I don't know anybody. Maybe 10% of the people were from church. 90% of them were from the community, and they were professional trivia people [laughter]. They brought coolers full of wine. I saw one table that had a chip dip thing with beans and green onions and tomatoes on a platter that looked almost as big as the entire table. These people were hardcore [laughter]. I sat with some church members off in the back because I didn't sign up in time. Had a good time. And thankfully we didn't embarrass ourselves. I think I may have contributed one answer the whole night when they finally asked us something about a song in the '90s. Most of the night I sat there and thought to myself, "Haven't been born yet. Don't know the answer [laughter]."

But the church, in that one event, opened its doors, allowed a non-profit in our community to come in, in a sense, sort of take over for their purposes, to raise a ton of money and to have a great time. And we were a part of that. And as I left, I talked to Brad Gift an Elder] here. And he sort of looked at me and said, "We need to do this more often. We need to open the doors and let our neighbors enjoy being here. And so I keep thinking about this idea of do unto others and allowing our neighbors to be blessed as we would want to be blessed. And so I went back in the Gospel of Luke and sort of wonder like, "Okay. What is that golden rule that we hear about? Where does it come from?" And while it's in the passage that we're looking at today, later in the Gospel, a lawyer comes to Jesus, and he said, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus asked, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" The lawyer said, "You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." And Jesus said to the lawyer, "You have given the right answer. Do this and you will live." I can love my neighbor. I can do good for them. I can bless them. I can pray for them. I can give them what they need. But then I come back to this text. Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. Give to everyone who begs from you. And if anyone takes your goods, do not ask for them in return. It seems to me that in this text Jesus is offering a higher standard than us just loving our neighbors as ourselves or doing to others as we would have them do to us. Jesus is telling us that we need to reconcile with those people with whom we do not want to have anything to do. The people who have really, really, really hurt us or worse. Now, from a detached position, you can say, "Well, this passage fits for this kind of sermon on this kind of Sunday because it's the end of epiphany. It's sort of a prelude." And looking towards Lent and Jesus in the last Sunday of epiphany, we lift up the highest example of the embodiment of God's love, which is Jesus Christ. The One who was able to love enemies. The One who is able to do good to those who hated Him. The One who could bless those who curse Him. The One who could pray for His abusers. The One who gave everything so that everyone might have eternal life. And then I think to myself, "This is a pretty high standard for all of us, but I'm thankful that it is the end of epiphany and the beginning or prelude to lent because epiphany lets us focus on the amazing way that Jesus could embody these characteristics, and it allows us to begin to think about all the ways we don't and the work that we still need to do.

The work of reconciliation and forgiveness and restorative justice that comes to us through God's love for us and for all people. And so as I was thinking about this, I was wondering about stories of unbelievable reconciliation, and I have a couple of those. The first is well-known, and the second I don't think is known as much, if at all. The first is about the Amish community near Lancaster, Pennsylvania, near the town of Nickel Mines, where in 2006, their local milk truck delivery driver went to the little one-room schoolhouse, gathered all the students together, barricaded himself in with them, and then created lots of havoc and carnage. He let some of the students go. He kept 10 girls with him. All of them were shot. 5 of them died, and then he took his own life. The stories that we heard about that experience was the amazing acts of forgiveness that happened within that Amish community, how they reached out the killer's family and to his wife and to his children and forgave him. They forgave him. Someone who went in to study how profound their forgiveness was, wrote a book called Amish Grace How Forgiveness Transcends Tragedy. He writes this about what he learned, "I think the most powerful demonstration of the depth of Amish forgiveness was when members of the Amish community went to the killer's burial service at the cemetery. Many of the Amish families had buried their own daughters just the day before. They were in attendance, and they hugged the widow and hugged other members of his family." Another person in that

same story said, "Yes. They forgave that heinous act, but they did not forget it. They still struggle with it, trying to make sense out of it. There's a whole group of 20-something young men who wonder if they could have done more, and there are people who still flinch at the sound of sirens or a helicopter. They forgave, but there's still work to do." The second story happened in 2011, in Miami-Dade County. A dear friend of a young man, Jordan Howe, was being bullied at school. Jordan was very upset by this and tried to figure out what he could do, and so, one day, he decided to take a handgun to school in order to stop the bullying and protect his friend. He put it in his backpack, he boarded the bus, and on the bus, he decided to take it out and to show some of his friends. And as he did this the gun went off. And it killed one of his classmates, a 13-year-old named Gina Guzman DeJesus. Jordan was arrested. There was the trial. Everything was moving forward to give him maximum punishment. And then Gina's mother Abby stood up at the trial and asked the judge to forgive the young man. Asked that he get the minimum sentence and made a heartfelt plea to the court. After listening to the mother the judge changed the outcome of what they were going to give to the young man, and he got only a year in juvenile detention and then probation. Gina's mother stayed in contact with this young man, and they now go together to different schools: middle schools, junior highs, and high schools around the Miami area and talk about the unintended consequences of gun violence. In fact, they were in a courtroom when there was a whole group of middle school students from a different school listening to their presentation when a young student raised his hand and asked Gina's mom how she finally stopped wanting harsh prison against the person who took her daughter's life. Gina's mother said, "I know he didn't do it on purpose. It took me a while to understand that. He's not a killer. I know in his heart he's sorry. I decided to forgive him." She forgave him but obviously, she and Jordan still have work to do.

It's difficult for us to think about the labels enemy and hater and curser and abuser. At least for some of us. But Jesus invites us to work towards that ultimate reconciliation with them. To offer peace and love where it is truly not deserved. I thought long and hard about who I hate or despise. Who I've not yet forgiven in my own life. I realize as I scanned through my remembrances that there is one man who still makes my blood boil. I too was in middle school when this incident happened. He was the football coach at the junior high that I attended. I was the middle linebacker on our defense, and during one play he decided that I wasn't tough enough. And so he placed the ball down on the ground, and he called my friend JR to come over. He was the center on the offensive line. JR was to get down by the ball on one side. I was to get down by the ball on the other, and our instructions were to crack heads. Crack. "Do it again." Crack. "Do it again." Crack. "Do it again." Crack. "Do it again." I think it was on the fifth crack that I began to see stars, and something inside of me broke. And I took off the football helmet and told him in front of my teammates that I was done. And I walked into our dressing room and have never played football since. I realize years later that I probably had a concussion from that experience. And I still just get angry when I think about it. And if I take the words of Jesus to heart I am supposed to love him and do good by him and bless him and pray for him. And forgive him. And this may not sound like good news to you, but I feel it in my heart. I'm grateful that I still have time to do that work. Jesus and Epiphany shows us what God is about. And as we transition towards Lent our focus now turns to the work that all of us need to do. Amen